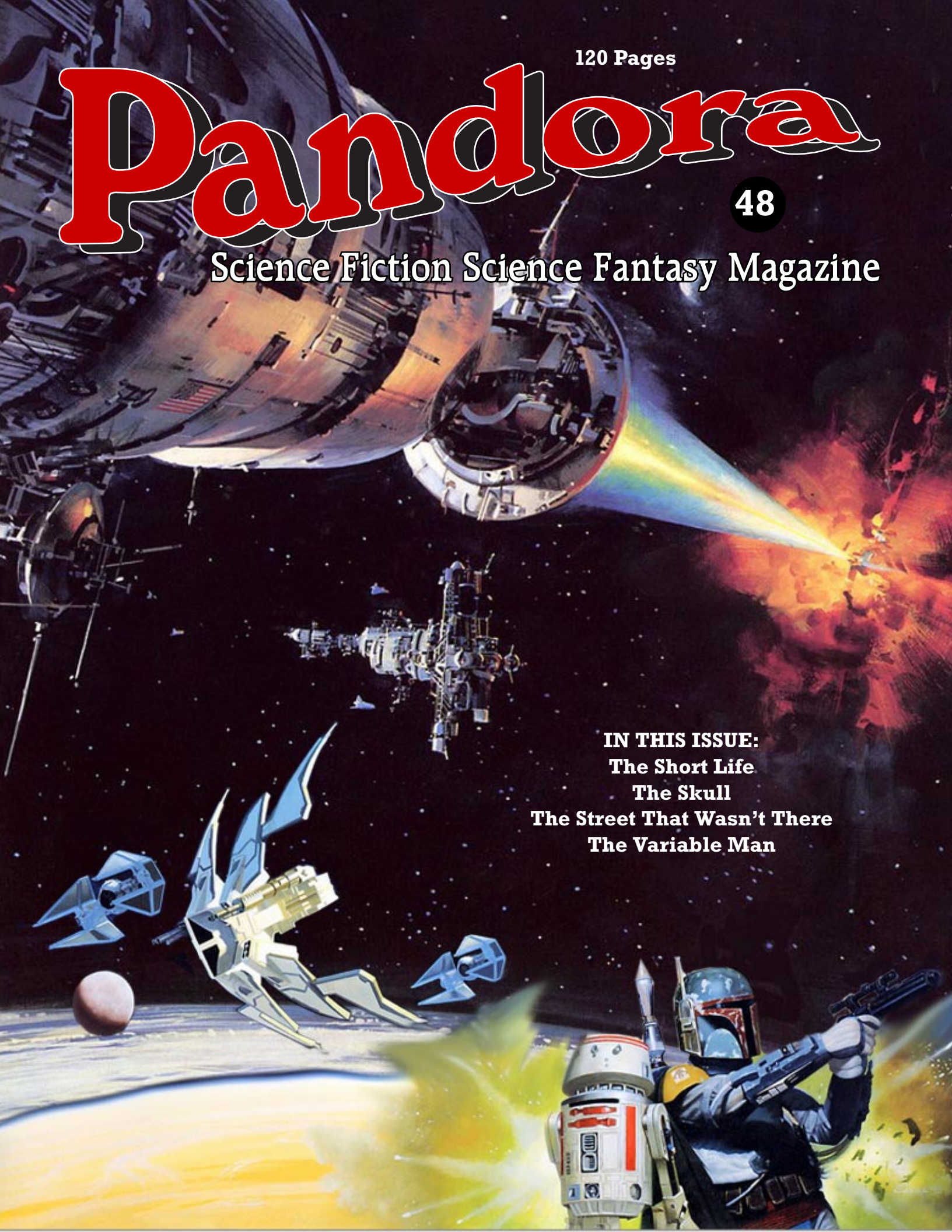
120 Pages

Pandora

48

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine



IN THIS ISSUE:

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The Skull

The Street That Wasn't There

The Variable Man

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THE SHORT LIFE

The Alien had to choose—and fast—a living entity to act through. He chose ... but he made one error....

1

An embryo stirred very slightly in the warm, dark womb that held it. Chemical stimuli and minute pulses of energy that were forming the complex proteins faltered. A catalyst failed briefly in its task, then resumed, but the damage had been done. A vital circuit remained incomplete, a neural path blocked. Time passed....

An embryo gathered in a metal womb, controlled potential building to titanic birth. A thread of wire melted under a breath of energy and a tiny, glowing light winked out. A rodentlike maintenance robot, scurrying to an unimportant repair task, saw no warning signal and crossed a control panel from behind at the moment that a relay closed automatically. Obliterated, the robot only briefly interfered with the proper functioning of the machine, but the damage had been done. For a split second at a critical moment, a mighty engine reacted out of control. Time passed....

An embryo jerked convulsively under a frightful onslaught, strained for life in a crowded womb while the mother's convulsions threatened it with death. The convulsions passed, the mother lived, the womb emptied, but the damage had been done, a record had been cut. Time passed....

2

There are logical limits for any pretense—limits beyond which the pretense becomes demonstrably absurd. Mother-love enabled the woman Helen Douglas to evade logic up to and beyond the point of absurdity, but even mother-love is not proof against the turmoil of the subconscious. A survival factor pried up a safety valve, and Helen Douglas found herself suddenly face to face with the admission that she had so desperately suppressed. She reacted with a terrible storm of weeping that shook the bed and was watched with complete disinterest by the dry-eyed imbecile beside her. Two-year-old Timothy Wainwright Douglas, congenital idiot, couldn't care less. It was nothing to him that his mother had at last faced the ugly knowledge that her only child should have been born dead. It was less than nothing to him that she could almost find it in her heart to wish him dead.

Release from the crowded womb

brought no immediate awakening from the long sleep of gestation, for a sense of identity comes only slowly to the very young, the new-born. He did not realize that his intellectual awakening, gradual as it seemed to him, was really extraordinarily rapid, a matter of only two or three weeks after birth. To him, with no frame of reference, it was a time of mystery that was not recognized as mystery. At first there was only Warmth and Hunger, for which he had no names but which he recognized by their presence or absence. There was the satisfying of Hunger, Sleep, and the return of Hunger. Had he been inclined to philosophy at that tender age, he would have considered the cycle a complete and satisfying one. In a few days, however, there were longer periods between the satisfying of Hunger and the coming of Sleep—a sort of comfortable, full-stomached reverie that was the beginning of the end.

With astounding precocity of which he was completely unaware, he began rapidly sorting and cataloguing noises that had previously conveyed no meaning. He now learned to associate certain sounds with certain sources and place others under tentative listings while awaiting further data. Smells received the same treatment as noises and often the two could be related. A certain smell and a certain gobbling sort of noise were often followed by a frightening swoop as he was lifted, but his eyes were not yet focused and could give him little information as to the manner or purpose of lifting.

In his fourth week of life he began to be troubled. His little handful of memories centered around a growing and not entirely subjective awareness of himself as an individual. Clearly, life could be divided into "me" and "not me." To have arrived at that conclusion twenty-odd days after birth was an incredible achievement. His mind was quick, but it could not reason further without a basis for logic, a system of reference, learned data from which further data could be inferred. There was uneasiness in him, but no warning of danger; only a stirring of memory that tried to rise to the conscious level. Wonderingly he prodded the memory a little, as an inquisitive child pokes at a slow-burning firecracker or a wary pup approaches its first cat. Like the sharp crack of a squib, the quick spit of a cat, the memory erupted and flung him back on his mental heels.

He felt a sensation that he knew was death though he had no name for it, and his immature defenses sprang into action, tried in vain to block the memory, to thrust Death back into its Pandora's Box. He impeded the flood by an infinitesimal fraction of a second, and then full awareness came and with it an understanding of the terrible thing that had happened, the thing that he?—yes, he had done.

The fledgling identity of "me" and "not me" sank forever into submergence, never to rise again.

3

When he was almost four, Timmy spoke his first words. He said clearly and matter-of-factly, "I want that one, Helen."

His mother's mouth slowly opened while her face turned gray with shock. The buckling of her knees in cataplexy

forced her to sit down heavily on a kitchen chair not cushioned for such descents, but she was hardly aware of it. Timmy, seated on the kitchen floor and surrounded by half-grown pups owned by a neighbor, screwed his head around to glance at her impatiently over his shoulder.

"I want that one," he repeated confidently, and pointed to the most ill-proportioned of an ill-conceived litter of mongrels. Helen raised shaking hands to her face, and screamed.

The quick scrape of a chair in the living room and the sound of hasty footsteps glissading on the throw-rug in the hall heralded the approach of Timmy's father. The doorway filled with flexing muscles that flexed in vain, but somewhat at a disadvantage by the strictly static tableaux. Helen sat at the table, her staring eyes fixed on the child who looked back in blank astonishment. Even the pups were motionless, having cowered in alarm at Helen's scream.

"What's the matter?" Timmy's father asked.

His voice was a spur rudely galvanizing her into action, into an awkward convulsion that landed her on her knees beside Timmy. She gripped his little shoulders with fierce intensity and almost glared into his eyes.

"Say it again, Timmy—say it again!" She looked around wildly. "He spoke, Jerry, as clear as anyone! He said 'I want that one,' and pointed! Timmy ... darling ... angel ... say it again!"

Timmy's face twitched uncertainly, giving the effect of a confused play of expressions. For a moment he looked as though he would cry, but then the crumpled, puckered lines magically smoothed. The eyes, dull and blank, stayed dry. He made a senseless noise and slobbered in doing so. His jaw was slack, his chin wet.

Jerry felt slightly sick.

"Get up, Helen." He lifted her somewhat roughly to her feet, overrode her babble. "You're frightening the ... the child."

"He talked, Jerry ... you heard him! Didn't you hear him!"

"Come in the living room and sit down." She was half-carried, her protests ignored. There was a certain grim determination in his actions as he made her comfortable. "Now we're going to face it, Helen. It can't be put off. Timmy was heart-wrenching enough by himself, but I've had to watch the change in you in the past few months. You're getting ... well, we'll call it hysterical. I could cut off my arm for saying this, honey, but, if we keep Timmy any longer, you'll just have a breakdown, that's all!"

She moaned softly, rocking back and forth in misery's timeless attitude. "I can't help it, Jerry. I ... just ... can't ... help it."

"I know, I know. So I'm making the decision for both of us, here and now, and on my head be it. Timmy will have to be put away this week, permanently."

"No!" Her wail was more of anguish than of protest.

"Yes! I can't stand coming home from work day after day to find you've manufactured some new evidence to delude yourself there's hope for him. One day he took the spoon in his hand to feed himself, another day he focused his eyes and

looked around the room as though he was really taking everything in—"

"You said you believed me!"

"So I did—at first. So I'd sit around all evening watching him, willing him to do something intelligent. And did he? No. Hon, I don't want to be unkind to you or to him, but I can't stand seeing you delude yourself, making yourself sick. We've both taken more than is good for us. We're at the end of our rope. We've got to face it now and do what should have been done long ago. It's not as if Timmy will miss us. He doesn't even know us, after four years!"

She gathered her forces, shut her eyes tight as if to deny his existence. "It's no use, Jerry, I won't do it. I am not deluding myself. I heard him speak. If that was illusion, it was so real to me that you may as well put us both away together!"

"Hysterical hallucinations—"

"Jerry, don't say that again. I heard him say 'I want that one, Helen!'"

"You see! Already you're embroidering what you heard! Now he's calling his mother by her first name. Honest, Helen, can't you see how ridiculous you're being? If you'd thought he said da-da or goo-goo I could have gone along with the gag, but to have him jump the whole learning stage and come out with a complete, concise, explicit little sentence ending familiarly with your Christian name—"

"I don't know how he did it, but he did it."

Jerry rose from his seat beside her, his lips tight. "I can't honestly say I love my own child, hard as I've tried. But I can say that I love his mother. If I have to bankrupt myself to give Timmy proper care in an institution, then I'll do just that, and do it gladly. But I won't falsely place his interests above yours. He was born an idiot and he will live and die an idiot. Nothing can change that. Timmy goes, and that's final."

He clamped his mouth shut and turned toward the kitchen where he knew his son sat, a stupid lump that couldn't even crawl of its own volition. The stupid lump stood firmly in the doorway, an uncertain, placating smile on its lips, a pup cradled in the slender arms.

"Jerry? I want this one."

4

By Timmy's sixth birthday, only his parents' adamant attitude had saved him from becoming a side show. Once the initial household uproar had died down and some degree of general sanity been restored, Helen and Jerry had another bad fright. They had grudgingly allowed Clancey, the family sawbones, to call in a psychologist friend, Philip Warwick. The combined efforts of these two to find an explanation for Timmy resulted in complete chaos, with Timmy suffering violent and erratic lapses into complete idiocy for varying lengths of time. Standard tests meant nothing, unless mutually exclusive results could be accepted as meaningful in themselves. At length, Timmy suffered a relapse of such duration that the parents became panic-stricken and quietly rebelled. It was obvious that he needed an atmosphere of peace and quiet. Confusion, excitement, or the concentrated attention of several adults simply threw him into a relapse.

The break came when Clancey called at the house and found it empty, deserted. He traced them to a new neighborhood where they had rented a house with a peaceful, walled garden. They were not pleased to see him, but Clancey was a psychologist of sorts himself and a working agreement was arrived at whereby he and Warwick could drop in frequently as friends and quietly observe Timmy, chatting with him when they could win his confidence and submitting him to whatever tests they could adequately disguise. But under pain of permanent excommunication from the Douglas menage they were not to discuss him with outsiders in such a way as to either identify him or draw attention to him. Timmy was to be allowed to set his own pace under their obliquely-watching eyes. He was not to become a subject for newspaper comment, for the speculation of strangers, or for the heated discussion of learned gentlemen calling each other liars in six syllables. For Timmy was something new under the sun.

Two years of observation gave Clancey and Warwick an impressive file of notes on him, and they were prone to sit after office hours with it on the desk between them, giving it morose glances. They were not happy. Sometimes, as now, they concluded an evening visit by sitting in Clancey's or Warwick's car parked outside the Douglas fence, holding an impromptu post-mortem on an intellectual corpse that had come to life in complete defiance of all the rules. They didn't notice the stealthy movement of one of the fence-boards, nor the small form that snaked through the shadows of concealing shrubbery until it was near the open window of the car.

"Take word-association, Clancey. I had a few minutes with him this evening before you got here, so I started him on a 'game' where we took turns in saying a word and trying to guess what the other would reply. I believe he thought I was rather a simpleton and needed humoring. Anyway, I tried him with 'home' and got a delayed response. It's happened before. Apparently the concept of home is tied to some deeper disturbance." There was a slight, uneasy movement from the listening figure. "Well, linking home and family, on my next turn I shot 'mother' at him. There was an immediate flash of confusion in his eyes and again a delayed response before he blurted 'Mom.' Something else had been on the tip of his tongue, but he choked it back and selected what seemed to him a more suitable reply.

"Now, we both know from two years' systematic observation that Helen is as well-balanced a mother as you're likely to find. I'm quite sure she has no unsuspected bad habits or traits that are leaving sensitive spots in Timmy's mind, making him flinch at the association, nor is there some long-standing or unresolved conflict in their relations. Yet 'home' and 'mother' both invoke blocks that inhibit response until consciously overcome, or invoke images that he wishes to conceal lest they betray a secret. I doubt very much whether anything that happened in his first four years could have left a deep impression on the completely imbecilic mind he is assumed to have had then. That leaves the past two years—"

(Confirmation) Game/not game....

Should data have predicted test? (Indecision) Possibly ... review later. So much to learn ... confusion inevitable. Next time respond "mother—three" (laughter) Invalid frame of reference—impossible work with/discard.

"Something else interests me there, Phil. You suggest he selected, deliberately, what seemed an appropriate response to 'mother.' Did you take the next logical step and try 'father?'"

"Yes."

"And did he anticipate it?"

"I'm sure he did. I see what you mean ... fairly sharp reasoning for a six-year-old supposed to be mentally retarded. When I shot 'father' at him he came back promptly with 'male-Douglas' almost like one word."

"Got the sex and identity right. What's wrong with that?"

"There's nothing 'wrong' or 'right' about it. I was hoping for some clue as to how his mind works. Maybe I got it, but I don't know what to do with it. I didn't expect a calmly objective cataloguing of the old man as a 'male-Douglas.'"

(Surprise) Where is error? Semantics? Sociology? Colloquial nuance? (Decision) Reject further word-games.

"If that's a clue, Phil, you can have it." Clancey hauled a notebook from his pocket and held it up. "Open this thing anywhere—anywhere at all. It'll open at an unanswered question. At the age of roughly three and one-half, a congenital idiot suddenly displays flashes of alert intelligence. For forty-two months that child was content to sit on his fanny and vegetate. Never crawled, never spoke, never played, seldom even focused his eyes. Then one day his mother sees him study some alphabet blocks with every appearance of curiosity. Awareness! For the first time!

"Later, he suddenly reaches out his hand and piles the blocks in a neat stack. Purposeful activity and perfect muscular control! No trial-and-error, no baby hesitation with hand poised—just a sudden assured, controlled action. Mama leaps for joy, junior relapses into idiocy, and no one—including me—really believes mama when she says it happened. This sort of thing goes on for several months—brief, erratic flashes of extraordinary intelligence, considering the subject. Then, a child who has never spoken a single word says clearly and politely, 'I want that one, Helen,' and a child who has never crawled puts his feet under him and stands up steady as a rock. You tell me, Phil—how did he do it?"

"Don't look to me for an answer. I'm only a lousy fifth-rate psychology teacher, as of the day you brought Timmy into my life. And the curse of Freud be on you for that kindly act of professional assassination. The answer is obvious, of course ... Timmy didn't and couldn't do what we've seen him do with our own wide-open, innocent eyes. We are the victims of a cunning hoax."

(Amusement) Difficult to experiment unobserved. Action too precipitate/no choice. (Affection/laughter) "The world is so people." (Chill) Danger! Madness!

"How does any child learn to speak?"

"Mainly by hearing others. Maybe Timmy learned the same way. Maybe he listened, absorbing the meaning and sound of words, trying them out in the si-

lence of his otherwise vacant little noggin. Maybe his mind awakened gradually to the realization that it was a prisoner in a paralyzed organ, strait-jacketed by blocks or short circuits. Maybe he spent his forty-two months of vegetating driving against those blocks until he partially broke them down and could speak. Maybe."

"And without ever having shaped his lips or tongue to intelligent sounds, he speaks fluently at the first try?"

"Why not? Any kid that will start out by addressing its parents chummily as 'Helen' and 'Jerry' and act naively surprised at the reaction, obviously has rules of its own."

They ruminated in silence for a moment.

"It's too easy to talk vaguely about blocks and short circuits, Clancey. How do you account for his completely erratic progress? Totally unpredictable, with alternating periods of complete idiocy and high intelligence?"

"Not totally unpredictable."

"Oh?"

"At least three things suggest a pattern. One is that his relapses, though erratic, are becoming ever shorter in duration and more widely separated."

"Yes, they are infrequent now and quickly ended."

"The second is that his grasp of the social pattern in which he lives—his environment, in all its subtleties—is constantly improving."

"Right again. At the age of six he can in many ways match a bright lad twice his age. Not in the subtleties, though—I disagree there. You can give him a simple or even a not-so-simple explanation of something he hears on the radio, dealing with it as a general theme in sociology, and he seems to grasp the broad outline with little difficulty, but in trivial matters of social behavior and human relations he's frequently uncertain, as likely as not to pull a howling bloomer. Seems unusually baffled and exasperated by some of the social mores he runs into, such as the many tabu subjects for conversation, or taking your clothes off whenever or wherever you feel inclined to. Poor Helen. She tries to explain and he keeps doggedly after her with ruthless logic, obviously trying hard to understand, and ... you know ... it's surprising how few really sound, logical reasons there are for half the accepted conventions that rule our lives.

"He's pinned me down several times to the conclusion that a certain convention exists solely because people can't be trusted to behave rationally without restraining rules. It's rather a dismaying conclusion when it's dragged out in the open like that, and it seems to horrify him. An ordinary kid learns by experience and accepts the rules with sporadic rebellion, but our boy acts as if they were beyond comprehension. And I think they are ... to him.

"The first crime drama he happened to see on TV turned him white as a sheet, and when he stuck his nose out the gate a few days later and watched some neighborhood kids playing cowboys and Indians with cap pistols, he was sick on the grass. Explaining the 'glamour' of the early west made it worse. He drew back from me as though I were contagious. I had the feeling that he pitied me. I won-

der, sometimes, whether he makes any real sense at all out of what is said to him. He's very slow to interpret the shades of expression possible in voice and face. I feel that potentially he has an exceptional mind, but the great difficulty is communication."

"Like pulling his leg. It's too easy to be fun."

"Exactly, unless the little so-and-so is pulling ours, which I sometimes suspect." Phil winced a little and rubbed his hand across his forehead. "Getting a headache. Well, what's this third item you had in mind?"

"I can't pin it down, but I have a feeling there's a fairly obvious physical factor linking the periods of relapse."

"Physical tiredness?"

"No ... the contrary, perhaps. At the start he got himself overtired pretty often, as though he overestimated his endurance, but it didn't seem to do him any harm. But if he awakens early or unexpectedly, there may be an appreciable delay before he orients himself. Then he comes to with a snap."

"Shock? Confusion of any sort?"

"Confusion, certainly. He didn't last five minutes when they tried him in school, you remember. Howled for his dog, then sat on the floor and dribbled. The confusion of being chucked into a group of noisy, aggressive six-year-olds was too much for him. You remember he recovered completely—almost instantly—when his mother packed him out of the school."

"That reminds me of something else. I think that dog is some sort of a symbol to him. Perhaps it has somehow become associated with security. Try this for size: his mind is struggling to free itself from its strait jacket; the dog captures his attention at a critical moment; the mother screams when he speaks, frightening him, but the dog comes reassuringly to his arms and subsequently—or did he see it as a consequence?—his parents make much of him. In other words, at the start of his rational life the dog is a friendly element and the parents a frightening one. The details of the association drop soon enough from his conscious memory, but not from his subconscious. When the dog is with him, he feels secure. When they are separated—it was not allowed into school with him, of course—his symbol is gone and he panics, much as an ordinary child panics if it loses its mother in a crowd."

"Slick, but not convincing. It touches on another peculiarity, however ... the way he wants that hound with him always, no matter where. Sleeps with it on his bed, eats with it by his chair, even takes it to the bathroom—by-the-by, he acquired the dog and bowel-control at the same time, if you recall—but does he like the dog? He never pets it to speak of. Plays with it sometimes in a clumsy, disinterested sort of way, but it's not the classic boy-dog relationship. If the dog is merely a symbol, as you suggest—"

"I didn't say 'merely' a symbol. If I'm right, an association as strong as this one could be devilish awkward and even dangerous, hooked to a hair-trigger mind like his. What if something happens to the dog before his dependence or whatever can be broken? Dogs get run over, you know, and even their normal life span is short. Maybe we ought to try

to break it up ... damn this headache."

(Regret/Despondency) Degraded to pain ... static/thick tongue. (Resignation) Delay, delay, delay ... break conversation. Time wrong.

"You been bothered with headaches lately?"

"Off and on—nasty sort of twinges. If I trusted myself with a carpenter, I'd let you give me a check-up. Well, let's cut this short. What I was going to say ... let's see ... oh, since Timmy seldom pays any attention to the dog, why does the dog stick to him like a shadow?"

Clancey grunted.

"That dog's no fool, stupid as he is. Clumsy, homely, and half-witted enough to sit on a tack for five minutes before he howled—I've seen him do just about that—he knows when he needs a protector. If it weren't for Timmy, the hound would have been destroyed long ago as an act of mercy. Helen and Jerry are resigned to him, of course, for Timmy's sake, but have you noticed that the dog reacts much the same as Timmy if they get separated? Casts about at once for a way to rejoin him, and the longer he's delayed the more he panics. Maybe it's a two-way switch—maybe Timmy and his dog are indispensable symbols to each other!"

"You dream up any more lulus like that, you keep them to yourself. Psychopathic dogs I draw the line at. Clancey, there is only one conclusion to be drawn from these here solemn deliberations. Throw out the textbooks and roll with the punches."

"Amen."

V

"There should be no deaths!"

Phil turned that one over in his mind, cautiously. A good deal of his attention was needed for the task of nursing his old car along the ruts of the dirt road, but the murmured exclamation impelled him to steal a glance at the boy sitting beside him. This was the spring of Timmy's tenth year—the sixth year of his friendship with "Uncle" Phil—and those years had taught Phil more than he realized, if less than he had hoped. He knew, for example, that the peculiar vacancy of Timmy's expression at the moment implied deep thought rather than the complete absence of thought that it suggested. That was a curious characteristic that always made the man a little uneasy. Timmy's face was sometimes radiantly, spontaneously expressive, the most sensitive of mirrors, and sometimes it was rather mechanically expressive, but it was only expressive in a positive sense. In moments of abstraction or daydreaming there was no faraway look, no frown of concentration. Only blankness.

"The world would get a trifle crowded, you know."

Timmy leaped the gap easily to connect the two remarks, as Phil had thought he would. "Oh, I didn't mean there should be no death. I was thinking of something else. That man they found dead in the bush yesterday."

"A man with a heart condition should never go hunting alone."

"Was it his heart, Uncle Phil?"

"His heart and his head both, if you

ask me. He had a bad heart, all right—I saw him have an attack once. You'd think a man like that would have sense enough to avoid overexertion, but he lost his way and started churning through swamp and brush in a straight line instead of looking for the trail again. Must have acted like a moron, running until he dropped."

"Would panic make a man do that?"

"It will make a man do any crazy thing imaginable, if he lets it get the upper hand. There's only a few square miles of marsh and brush here, with the town already crowding up against it. In a few years it will be drained and the land used for industrial development and so on, then the fools will have to find some other way to kill themselves."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, every so often we have to turn out search parties and have a grand shivaree looking for some idiot who usually turns up dead. Drowned himself in two feet of water, or run himself ragged, or even put a bullet through his head for no good reason. It's happened several times in the past few years, so the place is getting a bad name it doesn't deserve. Even the search parties often get themselves balled up and mill around in circles, perfect examples of mass hysteria. Sometimes I get fed up with the human race."

"I ... didn't know. I mean, about the ... deaths."

Phil laughed outright at the tragic tone.

"Oh, come now! Let's not be morbid about it! You wanted to drive out here, remember."

"I still do, Uncle Phil. You and Dad were talking about how you used to come out here every spring when you were kids, to collect specimens, and it sounded like fun."

"So it was ... in those days. This old dirt road leads well in toward the center. I used to spend a whole day hiking along here with my dog, just rooting around and having a grand time. It's a pity we outgrow the best things in life. Childhood scenes should be remembered, not revisited. We can remember, but we can't recapture. A few years ago I wanted some nature photographs so of course I came out here, sure I'd get some beauties. I don't know. I started out in high spirits, recognizing every rotted old stump along the way, but somehow it all turned to ashes. I lost interest and turned back without taking a single exposure—almost hating the place, in fact, as if it had let me down. Strange that a place I loved as a kid should seem so empty and uninviting now." He put on the brakes and looked around morosely.

"Don't you want to go any farther, Uncle Phil?"

"What for? You can see how overgrown the road is getting. I'll be lucky if I can find a clearing to turn around. There's nothing of interest up ahead, Timmy. The road dies out and then there's a couple of miles or so of swamp and flies. It's getting dusk, too—"

"I'd like to get out for a minute."

"Oh. Well, O. K., but make it snappy."

He settled back listlessly as the boy climbed out, holding the door for the dog to follow.

"Do you have to take that mutt ... never mind, go ahead."

The boy wandered off to the side of the road and Phil listened to the rustle of bushes, wondering at his own irritation. He felt ill at ease, anxious to be away. He started as Timmy came up beside him on the left of the car.

"That was quick."

"Yeah." The boy was holding a spray of flowering shrub and his hand passed casually over the flowers in a light caress. "Say, hasn't this flower got a sweet smell, Uncle Phil? Here, smell it."

"It's a pretty flower, Timmy, but that stuff has no perfume." He accepted the branch automatically, lifted it to his nostrils.

Time stopped.

He thought he felt a thump against the side of the car, but the impression faded before it was fully born. In a remote corner of his mind the ticking of his watch sounded as a cold, measured rhythm, a metronome with delusions of syncopation. He sat motionless, his forearm resting on the steering wheel, the spray of blossoms caressing his cheek, his mind stunned by the anaesthetic he drew in with each breath. He was as one lost in thought, his eyes open but unseeing, observing but not interpreting.

There was no sense of duration, of the passage of seconds or minutes. There was only a dream in which, suddenly, a gentle mind made its presence known. Concepts tapped lightly at his own mind and an automatic process of interpretation winnowed and equated until a gentle voice seemed to speak. The words were few, merely computed associations keyed to understanding, and with them were perfectly and intimately synchronized fragments of emotion and vision, softly washing over the surface of his mind.

(Urgency) Attend—attend! Challonari! Attend!

An impression of convolutions drifted through his mind—a shape, perhaps, and a color. He felt no curiosity, and let the impression drift. As a sunbather drowsing on a crowded beach, hearing the background hum of the crowd and now and then a more clearly spoken phrase, so he caught the edge of this communication. It was not for him. A second mind entered ... was it a mind? Yes, and yet very different. It was strong, but limited—perhaps childlike, in some ways. Alive after a fashion, it was receptive of emotion up to a point and even capable of emotion—up to a point. It seemed an embryo mind, in some ways well developed and in others with no potential whatever.

(RELIEF) IDENTITY BLURRED ... KNOW/NOT KNOW. (PERPLEXITY)

NO PRECEDENT ... REQUIRE INSTRUCTIONS. (CONFIDENCE/TRUST)

INSTRUCT PLEASE.

Instructions (Decisive) Sleep ... sleep ... sleep.

(AGITATION) IDENTITY NOT MENTOR ... INSTRUCTIONS INVOLVE

BASIC DISOBEDIENCE (CONFUSION/DISTRESS) CANNOT OBEY/DISOBEY

... DILEMMA INSOLUBLE TO CHALLONARI (PLEADING) REVISE INSTRUCTIONS PLEASE.

(Sorrow) Cannot revise. Identity mentor/not mentor. Challonari must obey identity.

(GREAT AGITATION) ACCEPT IDENTITY MENTOR/NOT MENTOR ... CANNOT RECONCILE BASIC CONFLICTS ... CANNOT OBEY/DISOBEY (SUDDEN HOPE) LOGICAL DIVERGENCE PERMISSIBLE ... SIMPLIFY EXPLANATION PLEASE.

(Reluctance/hesitation) Intelligent identities here ... unable communicate ... Challonari. Result ... so. (Pain) Communication ... so. (Wave pattern).

(UNHESITATING) ILLOGICAL/REJECT ... COMMUNICATION DESCRIBED IMPOSSIBLY LIMITED ... INCONSISTENT/HIGH-LEVEL INTELLIGENCE.

Challonari limited ... must accept. (Command) Challonari sleep ... sleep ... sleep.

(EXTREME AGITATION) CANNOT/MUST OBEY.

(Command/pity) Challonari has destroyed intelligence! Must sleep ... sleep ... sleep!

(AGONY ... HORROR/CONFLICT ... INSANITY).

Challonari! (No response. Grief) Ultimate withdrawal ... Challonari! Challonari!

Phil frowned, looking at his empty hand. It seemed to him that the spray of flowers had inexplicably vanished. There was an elusive sense of disorientation, a feeling of something overlooked. There was the tag-end of a remembered grief. There was—

"You were right, Uncle Phil. They have no scent."

"What?" He looked around blankly, saw Timmy tossing the spray aside. "Oh ... there it is. I thought I ... uh ... forget what I was going to say." Two voices that were not voices—a dream, a despairing cry. An elusive memory faded, faded. "There's mud on your cheek, Timmy. Did you fall?"

"No ... that is, yes." Timmy scrubbed his cheek industriously.

"Make up your mind. Hurt yourself?"

"No, I'm all right."

"Well, whip around to the other side and hop in." Phil watched him in the rearview mirror and noted the hasty dab at moist eyes. It seemed like a significant giveaway, but he couldn't imagine why. "Get your mutt in and let's go."

"Come on, Homer." The boy settled himself with his dog between his feet, and Phil laughed, his good spirits returned. He turned the car without much trouble and they bumped back over the wagon ruts.

"Why do you call him Homer, Timmy?"

"Well, on account of the Odyssey, you know."

"I see. Some day when I have a clear mind and a couple of hours to spare, you can explain the connection between Homer's Odyssey and a flea-bitten semi-airdale."

They rode in silence for a while, until the dirt road changed to pavement. Phil let his thoughts wander idly, thinking of nothing in particular. Scraps of this and that seemed to float to the surface and drift out of reach before he could capture them, had he been interested in trying. One fragment somehow caught in an eddy and remained in sight long enough to draw his attention.

"Challonari," he said, wonderingly, and almost ditched them as stabbing

pain shot through his temples. He held the wheel with one hand, the other clapped for a moment to his brow. "Don't do that!" he snapped angrily.

"W-what, Uncle Phil?"

"Sorry, Timmy, I didn't mean you. I don't know who I meant ... or, rather, what I meant, of course. I seem to be pretty confused tonight. I even startled poor old Homer with that swerve. Get his muddy feet off the cushions, Timmy." Homer sank back obediently to his usual place between Timmy's feet, but his muzzle rested on the boy's muddied knees and his brown eyes regarded both of them at the same time. Apparently he was not convinced that the upheavals were over.

"What does 'challonari' mean, Uncle Phil?"

"Oh ... that. Just something that came to mind."

"But what does it mean?"

"I don't really know, Timmy ... something about convolutions or a convoluted shape, I think, but that's only part of it. There are connotations of ... of intelligence? No ... ridiculous. How can you have a convoluted intelligence? But a brain is convoluted and to a greater or lesser degree intelligent. The ... um ... the question of degree comes into it, I think. A brain of limited intelligence, then, though damned if I know why I think of it as limited. Challonari ... challonari. It's not English and it doesn't sound like a technical word, but I must have heard it in connection with something ... quite recently, too."

"Sort of rhymes with 'shivaree.'"

"Only sort-of, Timmy. You wouldn't make a good poet. Shivaree—challonari. I mentioned shivaree when we were talking about people getting lost in the bush, didn't I? Did it have some connection with that? But how?"

"Maybe a sort of—mental trick?"

"Mental association rings a bell. Mental ... no, it's gone ... wait. Teacher, trainer, instructor—a brain of limited intelligence would need a teacher. Gentle teacher. Why gentle, for Pete's sake? But teacher and pupil, that seems almost right. How much can one word mean? What am I trying to recall, anyway? The meaning of a word? The associations connected with a word? The association of ideas? Blast it, this is more than tantalizing."

"Like when you wake up knowing you've had a dream, but you can't remember any of it?"

"Uh ... yes, like a dream. A dream of—" The blood drained from his face, leaving him gray and ashen. Timmy put out a hand in alarm, to steady the wheel.

"Uncle Phil!"

"It's all right, Tim. It ... it's all right. I had a thought there that kind of shook me." He relaxed with a shaky laugh, relief flooding his face once more with color. "What a crazy thought! I could have sworn ... well, never mind. But it shakes a man to learn what tricks his own mind can play on him, all in an instant."

"What kind of tricks, Uncle Phil?"

"Oh, no you don't. If you hadn't egged me on with so many questions, I'd have been spared a pretty nasty moment, you know that? Now let me concentrate on driving for a change so I can get you home in time for supper. O. K.?"

"But ... oh, O.K."

"Don't sound so disappointed, chum. It's been a pleasant drive, even if nothing much happened."

"Yes, Uncle Phil. Even if ... nothing much happened."

Spring changed to summer, and summer rolled into its final days. Phil was in a gloomy frame of mind when Timmy's eleventh birthday came around.

He watched Timmy draw a deep breath and—without puffing out his cheeks as a child would do—neatly blow out the eleven candles on his cake. It was an efficient, sprayless, perfectly-controlled operation, an operation carried out happily and in high spirits, and it depressed Phil. The "party" itself depressed him—a child's birthday party with no children present, unless you counted Timmy! Phil and Doc, Helen and Jerry, and Homer, the latter gray muzzled and stiff in the joints. That was the roster of the guests and it could almost be called the roster of Timmy's total acquaintances. His parents, his two friends, and a dog that at its best had never seemed bright and now was obviously half-dead with age. The boy was not normal, had no normal life, and gave no indication of ever being likely to take a normal role in life. He was a "disordered personality" if one could take comfort in a tag, but the true nature, cause and cure of his divergence from "normal" would remain unknown so long as his parents were afraid of tampering—

"Did you make a wish, Timmy?"

"Sure, Mom."

"Helen, honey—Tim knows that wishing when you blow out the candles is kid stuff."

"And what is he but an eleven-year-old kid?"

"He's too smart to believe in wishing, honey. Smarter than his old man, eh, Tim?"

"I'll never be as smart as you, Dad."

"That's my boy! But you don't kid me." Jerry turned to Phil and Clancey, feigning indignation. "You know what happened the other day? I brought home an old design that I dug out of the files and wanted to look over—a helical gravity conveyer—and when Tim saw it spread out on the table he said, 'That's the curve I was just reading about.' Now how did that little so-and-so know enough to call it a curve? I figured he was bluffing and got him to show me where he read about it, and the brat showed me all right—in one of my old college textbooks! Of course I only had to ask a few questions to find out that the college texts are far beyond him, but imagine him dipping into them on his own and getting anything out of them at all! How about that, young man? Explain yourself."

Timmy hesitated, his eyes dark with uncertainty.

"You said I could," he blurted defensively. "Remember? Remember I asked you one day and you said—"

"Your father isn't angry, Timmy," Helen laughed, hugging him. "Honest, you get worried about the darnedest things! He's proud of you! Don't you know paternal boasting when you hear it?"

"Oh!" The shadow lifted and he laughed sheepishly. "I get it. It was nuance of idiom that threw me. Calling me a brat and a so-and-so was affectionate misdirection to conceal—" he broke off

at their expressions. Helen darted a quick look around and came to his rescue again.

"Timmy-chile, where you git these heah high-falutin' ex -pressions I'll never know. Hit shore ain't from you' low-talkin' pappy."

"Or from yo' low-comedian mammy. It's all right, son—you just sound a bit bookish sometimes, that's all. Want some help with the dishes, Helen?"

"You know darn well you'd divorce me if I said yes. You and Clancey take Timmy in the front room and let him teach you something. Phil's just crazy to help with the dishes. Aren't you, Phil?"

"The obvious answer is yes. O. K., let's go."

They piled the dishes, joking and chattering until the sound of laughter from the front of the house told them that the others were occupied, then Helen put down the dish she was washing.

"Well, Phil?"

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"Phil, in plain language, is Timmy a ... a genius?"

"No, I don't think so. He's unaccountably bright in many ways and just as unaccountably slow in others. I don't think genius comes into it at all."

"That's what I think, too. Timmy's no genius ... yet he does things that only a genius-type could do."

"Don't exaggerate, Helen. A sharp youngster living a secluded life and studying more than he plays may be years ahead of other kids who go to public schools."

"He's farther ahead than you think, Phil. I have Timmy in the house with me all day, so maybe I know him better than Jerry does. He fooled Jerry with that business of the college textbooks, but not me. I think that for some reason Timmy doesn't want us to know how advanced he really is. I think he slipped up when he commented on that helical what's-it, then covered his slip by pretending he'd only leafed through the texts and picked up a bit here and there. I know when that boy's fooling, and I know he deliberately fluffed the questions Jerry put to him. Timmy's just plain lousy when it comes to dissembling, you know, as if it was completely foreign to him to lie. All right, all right, I know what you're going to say—fond mama building mother's-intuition fantasy around only child.

"Well, I kept an eye on him after that and about a week later Jerry brought home some calculus dealing with a new design he's developing. He ran into trouble with it and sweated and swore for an hour, while Timmy sat and read and I kept peeking in the hall mirror that lets you see into the front room from the kitchen. After a while Jerry left the room to look for some tables he wanted and Timmy slipped over and looked at his work, made a single notation, then dived back to his book as Jerry returned. Jerry started to sweat over the thing again, then suddenly did a double-take. He made some erasures and in five minutes had the whole thing worked out, cursing himself for misreading a figure or something.

"Now don't tell me it was just a coincidence. Timmy hadn't seen that problem before and it should have been miles

over his head anyway, yet he gave it a quick glance, spotted the error, changed the limits of an integration and put Jerry on the right track. Just like that."

Phil carefully massaged a dry plate even drier.

"So I stagger back and gasp, 'I can't believe it!' or something insane but appropriate. The disturbing thing to me is that I not only can believe it, I do believe it. Completely. I may as well tell you now what I haven't yet told anyone else, that I've been methodically tricking Timmy for some months past—in fact, ever since I began to suspect that his knowledge of the sciences was, to say the least, unusual for a boy his age. I probably led him into making that slip with Jerry, identifying the curve. By giving him the impression that any boy his age would know far more chemistry, math and physics than is actually the case, I tripped him into revealing that he himself knows a very great deal about them. Perhaps more than I do.

"I begin to suspect now that I didn't set my sights nearly high enough in leading him on, but God alone knows where he could have learned. On anything that could be related to the humanities he's very slow, but in the physical sciences he's out of this world. His secluded life—unable to mix with other kids, go to shows, games, or do anything that gets him into crowds—gives him a very limited background for understanding his environment, leaves him unboyish. He doesn't understand people. I constantly have the impression that he is anxious to do the right thing, but is simply baffled by problems in human relations."

"I know. He looks at me sometimes as though he's just desperate to reach me somehow—a lonely, unhappy little soul. He gets plenty of affection from both of us, but it isn't the answer—it just isn't the answer."

"Tell me, Helen, do you love your son?"

"Do I—! Well, now, really Phil—what kind of a question is that?"

"A simple one. Do you love Timmy?"

"Of course I do. He's very dear to me."

"Do you love your son?"

"Now look here—! I told you.... Phil, what are you getting at?"

"I'm wondering why you have no doubt that you love Timmy, but the question of whether you love your son confuses you and throws you on the defensive. You react strongly, evade answering, take refuge in exclamations and unfinished sentences. A species of stuttering. Can it be that you find it difficult to think of Timmy as your son? Do you doubt that he is your son? Here, sit down! I didn't think it would hit you so hard."

"Phil, the only other moment like this in my life was when I first admitted to myself years ago that Timmy was ... what he used to be. An imbecile. Phil, it can't be true! He is my son! There's been no substitution, no—"

"Easy, Helen, easy. I agree with you. I've checked back as fully as I can, and I'm sure there's been no trickery of any sort. Timmy was born to you eleven years ago, beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"But you've felt it too, haven't you? He's sweet and lovable in his funny, confused way, talking like a comic-strip kid one minute and an encyclopedia the next—so empty and faraway sometimes,

then loving and affectionate, as though to make up to us for being ... away. I'm sure he loves us, Jerry and I, as much as we love him, but I feel that we've failed him, that he wants love but it can't reach him. I'll say it, Phil. I feel that he's not mine, that he's apart from us. Ridiculous, isn't it? I can't feel true kinship for my own child, much as he means to me. I feel better now that I've said it."

"I wish I could say the same, but I don't know that I feel any better for adding one more question mark to a long, long line of them. Like you, I sense a loneliness, a reaching out from Timmy for something I can't give him no matter what I do, no matter how I try to understand. I watch him, and I think of that line '... a stranger and afraid ...' What is there that frightens him? Can it ... possibly ... be us?"

6

Indian summer now lay softly upon the land.

On a wooded rise ten miles from the outskirts of the town, close by a bluff overlooking the bushland, the tan walls of a small tent warmed to the late afternoon sun. Here and there beyond the bushland the supper-smoke of scattered farms stood columned and motionless. The only sound on the still air was the harsh, labored breathing of the dying Homer.

The dog lay in the open near the edge of the bluff, his eyes closed, his companions seated nearby. Phil had brought Timmy on a week-end camping trip that now appeared spoiled at the outset, for the short, steep climb up the bluff had unexpectedly proven too much for old gray-muzzle. His trembling legs had barely carried him to the top before he collapsed, and now it was only a question of how long he must suffer before release. Phil glanced toward a .22 rifle lying with their gear. It would be more merciful.

"No, Uncle Phil. He'll live until sundown at least. Let him have that much."

"I'm sorry this happened, Timmy, but now that it has I think we should make it easier for him."

"You liked him, didn't you, Uncle Phil?"

"Yes, Tim ... I'm a bit surprised to find that I really did. I can't say that I'm much of an animal-lover, but in his way Homer was the perfect Old Faithful. No beauty and not very bright, you must admit, but he never left your side. It won't seem the same."

"It won't be the same, Uncle Phil." The boy raised his head to look over the distant bushland. His face was composed.

"Timmy, I hesitate to say this, but..."

"I don't seem very upset about it?"

"Well, yes. Did you really care much for Homer? You never paid any attention to him, never petted or played with him, just let him tag along."

"I had no need to pet or play with him, and it was enough that he give me all of his attention. I should have spared a thought for him, his needs and limitations, but it's too late now." The answering voice was subtly changed from that of a boy, and strangely gentle. "A dog's life is so short, hardly more than today and tomorrow. A breath or two, and it has

begun and ended. When Homer dies he will be free, and I will no longer exist."

A chill slid over the man.

What makes a voice? Air and musculature and tissue, but what more? A brain, a mind—a life. An accumulative series of reactive patterns called Life grows like a fragile crystal around a seeding impulse that lacks a name acceptable to all, and the resulting structure is called "personality" or "character" and it influences what it touches in a manner peculiar to itself alone. Given the crude tools of a sound-producing mechanism it will, if it chooses and has the skill, disclose some trifle of its own true nature. Phil heard words that should have sounded idiotic coming from a boy, but they carried complete and instant conviction. Without elocutionary tricks, without fire and oratory, the boy-voice had changed in timbre, acquired a quality that could sway multitudes—the wild thought crossed Phil's mind that what it had acquired was the quality of complete sanity.

A suspicion, planted deliberately and nurtured through the years, matured on the triggered instant. Phil twisted around—alert, wary, almost hostile, his eyes searching the somewhat bony young face. His gaze was returned steadily, with assured composure.

"Who are you?" he demanded bluntly. "What are you?"

Timmy laughed lightly, patently at ease.

"I am nothing, Phil. Nothing at all."

"Rot. You are flesh and blood, human, and were born to Helen and Jerry. What else?"

"Is there more?"

"Stop playing!" Phil jumped up angrily, standing tall over the seated figure. "I've watched you for years. You've given yourself away repeatedly."

"Ah, that 'advanced scientific knowledge' worried you badly, didn't it?"

"I ... see. You revealed it deliberately. There are other things. Your aversion to crowds—"

"Their thinking confused me. They were dangerous."

"Were?"

"After tonight, crowds will not matter."

"Because Homer will be dead?"

"Because Homer will be dead, poor beast. My conscience will be dead."

"What on earth does that mean? I find it impossible either to doubt you or to think of you as a boy any longer."

"That is because your mind is filled with uncertainties, mine with certainties. You have never before met anyone in whom certainty was a clear truth unquestioned on any level of any remote corner of the mind. I am such a one."

Phil sat down helplessly. There was no point in standing. Whatever Tim was, he was not going to be dominated by tricks.

"What are you?"

"What can I say? I am a book that is being read, yet I am neither the pages nor the printing on the pages, but only the meaning inherent in the shapes and sequences of the letters that comprise the printing."

"Can't you give me a straight answer?"

"It is difficult. You must think about

what I say."

"But the ideas recorded in a book are merely—thoughts. They have no tangible existence."

"Nor have I."

"You're not a product of my imagination!"

"Hardly."

"Are you giving me that line about 'All is Illusion'?"

"No," the boy laughed spontaneously.

"Are you a mutant, a new evolutionary development?"

"No, nor am I a machine or a monster."

"At least you're alive!"

"That, I think, is a matter of definition."

"Then, for the third time, what are you! Stop baiting me!"

Timmy's hand closed on Phil's—a firm, warm, dirty and somewhat calloused boy's hand that was unquestionably flesh, blood and bone.

"Take it easy, Uncle Phil." Perhaps he had pushed too hard. The dancing eyes veiled themselves a little and the intangible, indescribable magnetism somehow faded. Phil, looking at him, was suddenly able to see him and to think of him once more as Timmy, a boy with unusual qualities, but the same boy he had watched for years. He shook his head and felt somewhat bemused, as he had done once before.

"Look, let's get a fresh start, Tim, and stop going in circles."

"O. K., Uncle Phil." He was an eleven-year-old again, responding obediently.

"I've suspected for years that we didn't know the truth about you—that you were something special, something new."

"Well—" Tim appeared to consider it gravely. "Yeah, I guess that's fair enough. I'm something new, all right."

"For years, then, you've been concealing something—something that showed through whenever you made a slip."

"Wanna bet on how many of those slips were deliberate?" Tim challenged, then joined Phil's rueful laugh. "Not all of them were, I got to admit, but most of them."

"But today—apparently because Homer is dying—you've abandoned pretense, come out in the open."

"Not all the way out, not yet. You've still got some shocks coming, Uncle Phil."

"I don't doubt it, you young hoodlum. You were pretty overwhelming there for a few minutes. But why all the mystery? Why not just tell me?"

"You explained why."

"Overwhelming? Are you that terrific?"

"I'm a humdinger, Bub. Think you can stand it now?"

"I think the full blast would be better than any more of your 'gentle' hints."

"That's what you think." Come now, the first shock had been fairly neatly delivered and fielded after all, the concept of difference proposed, established and accepted. "Well, here goes. You remember that spray of flowers I handed you in the car that night?"

"I've had my suspicions about them

ever since."

"O. K.—now smell this pine cone."

Phil looked at it with distrust.

"The thing that beats me is how I can be morally certain that pine cone is loaded, cocked, and ready to fire, and yet I take it," he let Tim put it in his hand, "and smell it." He raised it to his nostrils, held his breath for a moment, then gingerly sniffed.

Time stopped.

All sense of duration was gone. Awareness drifted in formless inattention until a focal point, a mere nucleus of intellect, captured and held it. The nucleus strengthened, became an impression of identity—not his own identity, nor any that he knew, but that of some Other. From this other presence came insistently the warmth and gentleness of good will, an unreserved outpouring that sought to evoke an unreserved response.

Isolation, the sanctum of the mind, took the assault, melting like an ice-castle in the sun—but before the tempting surrender could become irrevocable alarms rang through his being and his mind gathered in on itself in confusion, holding its isolation intact and inviolate. Through the opposing desires to yield and to withhold, to break barriers down and to raise them up, he detected from the Other a reaction both of pity and of revulsion. The pressure decreased. He knew then that what he yielded willingly would be accepted as sufficient, and no more be asked of him than he was capable of giving. Somehow, it was not a victory, but a defeat.

He became aware that the private domain he had claimed for his own was truly his own, a corridored, compartmented, dungeoned storehouse of filed fancies and forgotten files. A tunneled, revetted, embrasured and battlemented citadel filled with rusty armor and broken lances. A hock shop, a junkyard, a hall of distorting mirrors. A cemetery by the sea, a peak of glory, a slough of despond. A radiant light, an encroaching dark, the sweetest of melody, the sourest of discord. A library of trivia, museum of curiosa, sideshow of freaks, and shrine of greatness. It was the lowering pendulum, the waiting pit, the closing walls. It was the vaulting spirit, the gallant heart, the just and the kind and the merciful. Withal, it was a haunted castle, perpetually besieged, the towers soaring but the structure toppling. It was himself. His memories, his experiences, his actions and reactions, his life. And it was appalling.

A gentle prompting from the Other roused him from his self-immersion and for a moment he was all panic lest his secret had been observed. Mechanisms he had not known he possessed slammed doors and banged shutters over windows in a fine frenzy, so that the Other winced and fell back, pleadingly, then softly and insistently drew near once more. He realized that there was a purpose that must be served. Something was desired from him. A voice. He tried, and the croak of a clogged throat would have held as much meaning as the disharmonious thrust of thought that began in chaos and ended in futility. Abashed, he would not try again. Silence crept around him, the silence of isolation.

The most disarmingly hesitant, the

most reassuringly inoffensive of thoughts touched as lightly as a breath and was accepted as his own. He saw no cause to take alarm. Such an insignificant invasion was of no more moment than the blowing of a grain of dust beneath a locked door.

The thought lay among his own, and moved like a thread through his own, and the elements that it drew together became the acceptance of an idea. Secure in his ill-kept citadel, he permitted a rapport so tenuous he could break it at will, yet so strong that—

7

Memory tinged with homesickness tricked him into a sad reverie. That they were only memories, these thoughts that rose up to slyly capture his attention, was clear. He was under no illusion that he was experiencing for the first time events that had long melted into the past, for they had a common-place familiarity that stamped them as scenes revisited, events relived, dear friends recalled to mind.

He stood alone at the edge of a meadow with the afternoon sun hot on his back and debated with Andra the advisability of transplanting a certain shrub from its chance-chosen place in the meadow to a position in their own gardens. Throughout their discussion he was conscious of little drops of perspiration threading their way down his naked spine, and he longingly savored the coolness of the stream-bank on which Andra reclined, a mile or two to the south.

In good-humored exasperation he commented enviously on woman's lot and drew a dry rejoinder from a chance traveler on the highway to the north. He joined in the general laugh at his own expense, hearing the sally repeated and elaborated until it drifted out of conversational range. He was tempted to follow it farther out of curiosity, but it was not good form to blanket local conversation for a mere whim. While his attention was distracted, however, Andra became involved in an exchange of local recipes with a newcomer to the district, a farmwife whose husband had had a fancy to try the westward farm lands. He joined the husband in a wry grimace at the loquacity of women, and simultaneously caught sight of a distant figure crossing a ridge somewhat north of him. The figure paused at the same instant, looked searchingly in his direction, then waved on sighting him and strolled on. It was the traveler whose quip was now being repeated miles away, far in advance of him. Andra showed no sign of running out of recipes and returning to shrubs. He sighed, and stood alone in the meadow....

The casual facility of memory bridged time and space without disorientation. He was strolling in the evening with his bride, Andra's arm linked with his for the added pleasure of physical contact. In the manner of lovers they supplemented their thoughts with murmured words and sounds, thus sharing still another physical intimacy, for they were still in that newly-mated condition where every manifestation of the one was a source of delight and wonder to the other.

They paused momentarily by a vine-covered wall and he felt a cool frond reach out to caress his shoulder while a

long tendril curled gracefully about his forearm between the upper and the lower wrists. A few hundred-thousand years ago his remote ancestor would have recoiled violently from the touch of what was then a strangler vine, but now he casually disengaged the half-sentient tendril and with his mind caught the faint, faint flicker of rudimentary awareness; thus far had nature progressed with the vine, apparently reluctant to abandon a false start toward mobility and intelligence for an unsuitable species. Or perhaps, Andra added, in nature's long-term view the experiment might still be considered promising. He shook his head.

The vine had learned peaceful ways that saved it from extinction, drawing its food quietly from the earth while further developing a mobility of sorts, but eventually an impasse would be reached when greater mobility would endanger nutrition. If the roots withdrew from the soil, the vine would die—unless, he agreed slowly, echoing her shudder, the vine solved the dilemma by becoming again a carnivorous strangler. Nature made unaccountable blunders and sometimes found strange remedies, turning a blessing for one species into a curse for others....

On the same impulse they gazed at the night sky blazing with the heart of the galaxy spread around them, a galaxy as yet less than half mapped, only a small fraction of its secrets known. Like many new-mates they planned a leisurely, lengthy quest among the stars, a trip for which their mutual absorption peculiarly fitted them. After all, the advancement of knowledge still required physical and intellectual research and the joy of living still demanded physical and emotional release, but there was one great barrier to space-travel.

Leaving the great community of Challon ordinarily meant leaving an intensely experienced fellowship to endure a shattering isolation no less intensely felt, unless one were fortunate enough to be chosen for an exploration team. There was both comfort and common sense in the use of teams of the greatest numerical strength consistent with efficiency, but the resources demanded by such teams limited the number that could be fielded at one time. Consequently, private voyages in small craft were not entirely uncommon among the hardy—or the temporarily self-sufficient, such as he and Andra. In a few days they would leave Challon behind, break for the first time the half-spiritual link with all their world, and voyage forth in the belief that their love for each other was alone enough to sustain them.

At the same instant the same doubt of self-worthiness crept into each mind and was read and stoutly answered by the other, while a dozen neighbors near and distant interrupted their own concerns to murmur encouragement and recall the doubts they, too, had felt and learned to dismiss. Reassured he led Andra back to the house, scarcely aware of the background bustle of other minds busy with other matters—nor, in fact, greatly caring at that moment that others existed. The manner of love may change, but not the manners of lovers.

Memory surged after memory on waves of nostalgia and homesickness that told their own story of why the memories had been long buried.

Challon had fallen away behind them and the strangeness of the cleavage from their fellows had dismayed them. In and around the spaceport center, a multitude of the fellows they were never to see again had paused long enough in their own affairs to mesh thoughts in a final projection of encouragement that reached after the dwindling ship like a gesture of farewell.

A long, long farewell. A final farewell, unrecognized for the last parting that it was.

They had known from the experience of others that the first terrible silence would be a hard thing to endure until the strangeness wore off. At first they huddled like two children, driving their thoughts far into unanswering space in desperate disbelief that such utter silence could be. Repelled by space, they turned to each other and found more complete union than they had thought possible. From the depth of their union they found the strength and growth and maturity to adapt, to endure, and to survive. The fear passed. The worst was over.

Planetfall succeeded planetfall and the routine of their activities became smooth and practiced. As was the custom, they had been asked to obtain various items of information from sundry known but largely unexplored planets to help determine whether a later visit by a full-scale exploration team would be advisable. In one system they made a rapid instrumental survey of the only major continent on the only inhabitable planet, from a height of a hundred miles. In another, a skimming prospecting trip in a certain area confirmed a predicted rich ore body. And at all times, of course—particularly when they left the known systems behind and entered virgin territory—there was the Challonari to be trained and observed.

The Challonari—a part-organic, artificial brain—was one of the most promising recent developments of Challon science. It was also one of the most debatable, for the Challonari was capable of independent thought in its limited fashion and yet had been devised solely as an instrument, a tool. It had no freedom of action, no physical independence, but it had childlike emotions and—this was the damnable thing—a sense of identity and awareness of its creators as such. Thus the moral issue was raised. To the Challon, the control or coercion of an independent intelligence was a cardinal outrage. No greater sanctity existed than the sanctity of the individual, for anything that prejudiced or restricted the right of the individual to full mastery of himself was worse even than the deliberate taking of life. It was murder of the ego. In a telepathic society, life itself could not be more precious than self-control.

The combined growth and manufacture of the Challonari had been stopped in horror when it was realized that their capabilities were greater than anticipated. An organic tool had not been created, but rather a ... what? When does a tool become an entity? If it is an entity, what right have its makers to control it and use it as a tool? What right have they to—the thorniest issue of all—destroy it or otherwise put it aside when it is no longer required? Until these fundamental issues could be settled, the handful of

Challonari in existence must be cared for, trained and observed as if they were backward children.

The main function of the Challonari on such a voyage as this was to safeguard the ship and its immediate vicinity when on strange worlds. This it accomplished by a swift, simplified appraisal of the offensive capacities of any life form coming within its limited range. If their natural weapons—claws, size, poison, fangs—rendered them potentially dangerous should the Mentor leave the ship, then the Challonari projected into their minds a simple disinterest in the environs of the ship, a reluctance to approach closer. If this failed, the reluctance impulse became tinged with fear, the intensity of the fear increasing until the desired retreat occurred.

If the approaching unknown was of sufficient intelligence to identify the disinterest-reluctance-fear impulse as a telepathic warning, then no further effort was made to turn it back, much less to hurl it back by force. That would have been unthinkable. An intelligent entity approaching the vessel would be welcomed and requested to identify itself, while notice of its approach would be delivered to the Challon Mentor. Stranger and Challon would then inevitably join in friendly greeting, for hostile suspicion was unknown among minds that lay open one to the other. Among the handful of known life forms of sufficient intelligence to possess highly organized communications, no exception to this natural rule existed. A meeting of minds was a meeting of friends.

Memory flinched, wavered, then flowed on into previously forbidden areas. The long outward voyage approached its turning point, its disaster point. He did not know how or why it had happened. Perhaps in their mutual absorption he and Andra became careless. They had entered a planetary system, he recalled, and he had casually manipulated the controls. His perceptive faculties detected a tiny spurt of flame somewhere out of sight in the control bank, then the potent engines reacted out of control for a critical instant near planetary mass. The swift restoration of control only eased the crash, the automatics taking over a fraction too late after the fragile living tissue was smashed against the walls.

The return of consciousness told him at once that he was in the presence of death. Lying paralyzed and helpless in a pool of his own fluids, he could see the jelly that had been Andra. He quietly resigned himself to the death that might yet take days to come. It would be welcome.

An interregnum of shock followed in which his normal faculties were unseated, but with the passage of time he roused himself a little. Weakened as he was, his perception told him that the ship had buried itself deep in a swamp until it rested on bedrock. A dozen feet of muck and water lay over it. Even had they survived the crash they would have been helpless unless intelligent aid could be enlisted. He tried to drive out his thoughts in a cry for help, but the strength was gone from him. Within a radius of two miles there was no intelligent life, if any existed on the planet.

More from habit than for any other reason, he awakened the Challonari. It had survived the crash unharmed in its

carefully cushioned immobility, unaware that anything had transpired between the last planetfall and this one. It immediately perceived that one of the Mentors had gone, but before it could ask questions it was sternly directed to concentrate its attention on the environs of the vessel. Having thus distracted it from the presence of death, he sank back gratefully into a stasis of no-thought. Let time pass. It would bring succor or death, and he could do nothing more to hasten either one.

The Challonari roused him from his stupor on the third day after the crash. It was disturbed, excited by something beyond its comprehension. While he had lain helpless and shriveling on a compartment floor something unusual had approached to within half a mile of the ship through the thick swamp vegetation. The life form had apparently detected the first tendrils of thought from the Challonari and without preamble, as a natural defense, erected a savage mental shield. Pain and chaos that made coherent thinking difficult shook the artificial brain, but since this evidently was not an intelligent life form, else it would not have reacted in such a manner, the Challonari increased in intensity its fear-reluctance impulse. The mental shielding of the intruder blazed and crackled with increasing dissonance, radiating pain, fear and panic, but no decipherable intelligent thought. It drew nearer, erratically, apparently running, then swiftly lapsed into unconsciousness. That was when the bewildered Challonari had called him for aid.

He reached out wearily with his mind in automatic response, touched and hastily withdrew. Even when unconscious the strange being had an aura of discordance about its mind. He would have shivered had he still been capable of physical reaction, for this was Unsanity, a thing he had heard of but never before encountered. The Challonari caught his protective thought and withdrew from contact, though not without a soft protest, for it was inquisitive as any child. It, too, had heard of unsanity. Rare stresses or injuries now and again temporarily upset the balance of the mind and required the healing touch of other minds. But unsanity was not something the Challonari could handle. It withdrew from possible infection, protestingly, fearful for its beloved Mentor but incapable of disobeying a clear command.

His own great pity for the sick creature outside conquered the inertia of approaching death and he rallied what mental forces he still retained. He could not disregard suffering nor withhold whatever aid it was in his power to give. Carefully, knowing something of what to expect, he probed the shield which was no true shield but an uproar of faulty coordination comparable to the disruptions coming from a badly tuned radio. Wincing, as a musician winces when harsh, grating dissonance strikes his ear, he gingerly probed deeper and deeper, exploring this strange and fascinating structure that was unlike anything he had ever experienced. It was an extraordinary complexity that spread before him—a maze, a labyrinth, a magnificent corruption of order and reason.

His first discovery he half expected. This was a mind of an intelligence level not far beneath his own, though fearfully

hobbled by misconceptions, superstitions, half-truths and fallacies. Life had brutally mishandled and shackled—life had? It was an adult of its species. How could its condition have existed undetected for so long? He extended his explorations, and suddenly the incredible truth lay revealed.

The dominant species on this planet was that theoretically possible but logically improbable mistake of nature, a race of intelligent nontelepaths!

Fantastic as it was, there was no room for doubt. He was glad he had ordered the Challonari to withdraw from contact. To accept the existence of such beings required a flexibility under shock, an adaptability of reasoning, that the limited Challonari could never rise to. It was like a blow at the structure of the universe, but it raised a fascinating, age-old problem—what possible means of adequate communication could they have?

Excited despite the great discomfort of maintaining contact with this mind, he extended his explorations in search of the answer. A growing suspicion was quickly confirmed beyond question, explaining at once the sickening deformities of the wasted mind and the enigma of the alternative means of communication. There simply was no adequate communication! From that, all else stemmed. Each of these creatures, these—he searched for the term—these "Man" as they called themselves, was an island, an isolation of ego in a flood of dark fears that began lapping about them in early childhood and never ceased to rise. And this, by its own conception, was a "normal" specimen! It had "matured" in a thoroughly competitive society instead of the completely coöperative society of the Challon. It had never really known or understood its own true nature, much less that of its fellows. It had never truly known security, serenity, freedom, or peace. The eternal wonder was that it had progressed at all.

Deeper and deeper he explored, tracing and classifying, filled with awe. The incredible creature knew little or nothing of its own nervous system and would not have been aware of loss if the most essential portion of its brain had been surgically removed! Its life span was only a small fraction of what it should have been since, in its ignorance, it failed to repair itself as it had the innate ability to do. And yet, what an unbelievable treasury lay locked and sealed here. Only long study could render this infinite honeycomb intelligible, even to a Challon. Nothing like this had ever been known.

Mingled horror and profoundest admiration grew at what he found, but the creature began to awaken. With a deft skill he planted a suggestion, then hastily withdrew from contact before the impossible discord of mental cacophony became unbearable. The creature rose, wondering at its previous panic, and moved away from the vicinity of the vessel that now, above all else, it must never discover.

That was the first problem to be faced.

By learning what he had, the heaviest duty and the greatest moral obligation his race had ever borne was laid upon him. The last secret of these "Man" made effective action imperative. Although he him self was crushed beyond

hope of survival, somehow his new knowledge and all that it implied must survive.

Unobtrusive, physical reduction of the ship to completely unrecognizable debris might have to be accomplished eventually, but it certainly was not immediately possible. However, perception told him that the heavy vessel was already hidden beneath silt and stagnant water. It would be safe for a while from accidental discovery. The Challonari was self-sustaining and could survive untended for years, if necessary, serving to keep the area clear of wild life that might draw hunters of the dominant species dangerously near.

There remained, then, the problem of providing a substitute for his own personal survival. Here, the prospect seemed hopeless. The requirements were a continuance of understanding, together with both the will and the ability to act as necessary. Theoretically, he could have forcefully taken possession of the body and mind of any suitable subject, but the mere thought of such a violation was impossibly abhorrent. Respect for the right of the individual to self-will was so deeply ingrained as to make the deliberate unseating of another's reason virtually impossible. On the other hand, free-willed coöperation and understanding were equally out of reach; to enter the conscious mind of these beings was agony for both parties. They could neither project nor receive thoughts.

Ebbing vitality and the increased urgency of the problem drove him to a desperate resource. A pregnant female came within the extreme range of his perception. An embryo mind might serve! The mind, as yet unsullied, sleeping, a blank page untouched by the world, was open to him. If the appropriate knowledge was seeded in its memory banks it might—it must—remain sane despite the world, and a sane mind would not dispute what must be done.

He made a quick evaluation of the subject mind and discovered the flaw. The intelligence potential was too low. The embryo would not be capable of understanding the planted memories as they came to the conscious level, nor be capable of acting on them if they were understood. Time was ebbing fast, and vitality with it. Very well, then, the most desperate, the most questionable resource of all remained. The unused, unrecognized prime center, true seat of the intellect, must be activated the way nature presumably had intended that it should be, had not something gone wrong in the dawn years of the planet.

There could be no moral objection to this measure if successful, since it amounted to giving sight to a blind man. The element of grave doubt lay in the relative chances of success or failure. The strange, interlocking structure of the unconscious mind of the embryo was not something that could be unraveled and examined in a hurry. Honesty compelled him to evaluate himself as young and inexperienced, not especially noted among his own kind for brilliantly incisive judgment. It was not the sort of thing that he should even attempt without long study. It was too risky, too indecisive, too—

Time made the decision. There was no time left. The chill of death told its own story. In an agony of haste he summoned

all that remained of vitality and fought off Death while he entered the embryo mind.

The fast-shriveling body in the spaceship retained life long enough to recognize the blunder, but not long enough to correct it. The wrong was done, and could not be undone.

The memories that mercifully blurred became clear again. He knew that in due course the mishandled embryo experienced birth, entering the world normally as a helpless, feebly squirming, pathetically vulnerable mite, and in no way drew unusual attention to itself. No one knew, or cared, that intellectual awakening was phenomenally quick, the first tentative questionings occurring in only the fourth week of life. He recalled how the stirring of objective awareness brought with it a half-remembered pang of death, and how the stirring of innocent wonder brought—memories. The memory banks flooded open at the touch of wonder, poured out their contents, and the fledgling ego went down before the surge, overwhelmed forever.

Inexperienced in such delicate maneuvers and overtaken at the crises by the climactic unseating of Death, he had poured into the empty memory banks the whole contents of his own mind. All his knowledge, all his experiences, all his memories on every level of incidents great and small. Everything. Including the complex and ineradicable concept of his own identity.

8

The involuntary start that shook the pine cone from his hand freed Phil's nostrils of the anaesthetic. Rapidly clearing eyes watched the cone fall near his feet and roll a few inches. A hawk that had been wheeling in the sky at the edge of his vision was still wheeling. Only seconds had elapsed, but this time there remained a clear recall of all that had transpired in those few seconds of lost time—seconds in which he had lived another's memories as though they were his own.

Reluctantly, impelled more by fascination than intent, he raised his head and faced his companion. The compassionate eyes that met his did hold certain childlike qualities of freedom from suspicion or hardness, but the gaze was not that of a simple child, nor was the bearing. Incongruity sparked a scarcely-controllable impulse to hysterical laughter. A small boy seated on a log, regarding his elder with gentle kindliness and understanding! Phil made a sound deep in his throat and swung his head away, afraid he was going to be sick. "Timmy" made no move. The silence endured, as it had to endure until one reaction or another prevailed. Gradually Phil worked to a conclusion.

"You call it a 'blunder,'" Phil said thickly. "You made a freak of an unborn baby for your own ends, and you call it a blunder. Anyone else might be content with a little innocent butchery, but not you ... you take over children, body and soul!"

"No."

"What we've been calling Timmy is a secondhand suit of clothes for you! And you claim you're not a monster!"

"Nor am I."

Phil struggled for violent words to match his feelings, then sighed heavily. "No," he agreed, despite himself. "You are not. I know that. Maybe you've controlled me just as you tricked me into entering your mind and living your memories but, sickened as I am, I still can't help believing you more implicitly than I've ever believed anyone. Nor do I see any reason to."

"You've never known anyone as surely as you know me, now that our minds have been in phase. Emotional reactions stemming from a dozen hidden causes may mislead you, but at the back of your mind you know me."

"And you know—me."

"I know only what I need to know about you. Your private memories are your own and will always remain so unless you invite me to share them."

"Yet you opened all yours to me?"

"Far from it. At this point it would give you too much to digest all at once. The major part of my concentration was required to maintain mental contact without any help from you, and to blanket the interference set up by the analytical part of your ego through its fixed, deep-rooted conviction equating the individual with mental isolation. Faced with absolute proof to the contrary, your analytical mind still tries to insist that what it has always believed to be true must still be true, otherwise everything is suspect and, therefore, anti-survival. In other words, on a survival level your mind tries to reject free telepathy as it would reject any other upsetting of the basic tenets of your existence. That and the disharmony existing in your mind is a large part of the 'protecting' aura of discordance that seals you off from me. The memories I shared with you I selected and edited for expediency. Unfortunately, your physical reaction to a startling thought caused you to break away before you had the full truth and left you with a false impression."

"Either the memories you fed me were truth, or they were lies. Which is it?"

"The data was true, but your interpretation of it is false because you are still in a state of shock, still fighting for survival on a moronic level. What do you take me to be?"

"You name it. By your own admission, at best 'you' are a false personality forcibly impressed on a helpless mind that never had a ghost of a chance. In effect, you are a parasite living on a host, the reincarnation of an ego that should be eleven years dead."

"Not eleven years dead—only eight."

"What difference does ... eight?"

"Eight years dead."

Prickles crawled over Phil's scalp and his mind raced. A series of memories snapped into place.

"Eight. And I laughed at Clancey!"

"I know—I heard. You were getting too close for comfort so I distracted you by giving you a headache."

"Stop—let me get my breath!" His voice rose until it threatened to crack. What am I talking to! A dog?"

"Yes."

"Homer? I don't believe it!"

"Watch." The boy slipped from the

log and sat beside it on the ground, his back braced. "Timmy would simply fall on his face," he explained, and with the words the face became empty and the mouth hung foolishly open. Control had been relinquished. The corner of Phil's eye caught an answering movement that his senses wanted to reject, but he turned. Homer had raised his head painfully and was looking directly at him, unmistakable intelligence in the exhaustion-glazed eyes. The fringed lips curled back, the throat worked. Strange sounds were forced out, growling but not doglike.

"Ar-ro ... ar-rik." It was a barely recognizable distortion of "Hello-Warwick." "Ok-all ... orr ... ron." Vocal-cords-wrong? "Im ... ork." Tim-talk?

The gray-muzzled head sank back wearily. A scuffling sound drew Phil's dazed eyes and he turned back in time to see Tim sit up again briskly, ignoring the old dog.

"I hate that mangled speech, don't you, Uncle Phil? I'll still call you that, if you don't mind. You're still as much my uncle as you ever were, and I'm the only Tim you've known." He watched Phil anxiously. "Knocks the wind out of you, doesn't it? But ordinary speech is painfully limited to begin with, without trying to force it from poor old Homer." He chattered on nervously, giving Phil time to collect himself. "You see, Timmy is as mindless now as when he was born, three years before 'my' ship crashed in the swamp over there. Look back through your newspaper files and you'll find a brief mention of a mysterious explosion reported during a night of heavy rain. That was us." He wet his lips, watching the silent white face. "Look, I had nothing at all to do with Timmy being born an imbecile. He's like a car that functions well enough if a driver takes over the physical controls that Timmy is incapable of handling for himself. Lacking a driver, the controls and the car stand idle. It is only the body that I manipulate, not the dormant, disconnected mind. For myself, although I can't help identifying myself emotionally and subjectively as the Challon, Objective reason assures me that I am Homer, with a complete but false set of memories and an artificially stimulated intelligence.

"As the Challon, I realized that the embryo Homer was of low actual intelligence, but high potential intelligence. The dangerous peculiarity of this planet is that several of the higher species have no known or recognized function for the most important portion of their brain. It lies fallow, unused, blocked off much as Timmy's whole mind is blocked off from his service. In eight years I have done no more than form the mere skeleton of a theory to account for that, but the means of correction was obvious from the start. Like the appendix that floats free at one end and serves no known purpose, the brain has an incomplete neural path of an unusual nature that has effectively camouflaged its true purpose. The intended function of the connection was the energizing of that prime center which you have not yet discovered and without which you differ from Timmy only in degree, for you cannot realize more than a fragment of your incredible potential.

"The same condition exists among the higher mammals. Releasing Homer's blocked potential placed at his service

the intellectual capacity of a very clever human—according to your false standards—but not of a human genius. If I had not imposed my ego on him ... you see, I cannot help thinking of myself as the Challon, although I know I am Homer ... if I had not robbed Homer of his identity and self-will, of his right to possess and control himself, he would have developed personality, characteristics and aptitudes of his own, appropriate to a canine of high intelligence. As it is, there are false memories of aptitudes Homer never had nor could have. Physical limitations alone make some of them impossible. How could a dog tinker with machinery, for example? Yet I 'remember' working on machines of my own design. Homer's mind, in other words, remembers as first-person data experiences it never had.

"In actual fact, 'I' who speak to you now am no more than the record contained in a book. In terms of personality, Homer is the hidden structure giving strength and substance to a false facade. 'I' am the false facade, faithfully copied from another structure. 'I' am a superimposure of ephemeral data, governing its own employment by a mind that has been restricted from developing its own data. The 'I' that speaks to you has no real existence, though its pattern is being subtly and continuously altered by that which it cloaks. If you put a drop of intense stain and a drop of powerful scent into a large tank of distilled water, you change the superficial character of the water, make it seem to be other than what it is. But it remains essentially a tank full of water, now containing an obtrusive trifle of alien matter in addition to the hydrogen and oxygen that decide its most significant properties. That is what the Challon did to Homer—he released the potential, then accidentally but indelibly stained it with his own personality.

"To me, now, it merely seems as though I first suffered death and then an unwelcome resurrection, awakening in despair to find myself usurping the helpless body of an almost new-born animal. Nothing physical or spiritual of the Challon survived, but the embryo mind had been fed a ready-made identity and so believed that it had already existed as a Challon before re-birth as a dog. Its brain received instantly all 'my' training, so that it became at once 'mature.' What I have endured in these eight years—the isolation of mind and inadequacy of body—have been a blunderer's reward visited upon his victim as a further injury. Now that Homer lies near death—and 'I' with him, of course—I welcome 'our' approaching release from an unhappy situation.

"Wait—let me finish. Your main concern is what will happen to Timmy when 'we' die, but it will be simpler to understand if I explain as much as I can first. Finding myself to be a rational mind in the helpless, immature body of an animal, I thought I was isolated forever. In choosing the embryo to begin with, I was driven by the need for haste and had not understood the limitations of a canine in a human world, nor would I have had any alternative if I had fully understood. When it was too late, it was not difficult to predict my future. I had no means of communicating with the dominant species, Man. In time, if I survived the hazards a puppy is exposed to, I could re-

veal my unusual intelligence—could even learn to communicate in some hopelessly labored manner. By using my store of inherited knowledge I could, if anyone would take a dog seriously, advance your science. But I could do nothing toward my main goals without exposing myself as an imitation Challon, and that I must never do lest I loose terrible consequences.

"I knew that the life span of my new body was pitifully short. The female had suffered repeated convulsions that affected the formation of the embryos and we were an ugly litter of little mongrels, doomed by our physical imperfections to a shorter-than-normal life if we were allowed to live and exposed to early drowning if we could not quickly charm ourselves into a home.

"The remainder of the litter—my brothers and sisters, if I could think of them as such—were callously placed in a weighted sack and tossed in the swamp, but by that time I had found a home. The Douglas home. Their child, Timmy, was an imbecile whose short-circuited mind lay open to me. I found by hasty experiments that Homer's mind was capable of controlling and manipulating the imbecile, like a puppeteer. The difficulties of controlling two bodies at once are tremendous, which is why Homer always struck you as clumsy and almost half-witted—he had to receive the absolute minimum of concentration so that his exhaustion at climbing the bluff this afternoon, for example, was not recognized in time. Well, there it is. I took over Timmy's helpless body eight years ago—too abruptly and with many errors—but it insured my survival for a short time at least. Now that time is at an end and the greater part of what I must do is still to be done—"

Phil sat with his face averted, his hands clenched between his knees. "The instinct to survive," he said in a muffled voice. "I can't blame you for what you did, but it was cruel! What a damnable trick to play on the parents!"

"Believe me, I know what you feel but there was no other way."

"No other!" He swung around, his face mottled and his breathing heavy. "Whatever you are, you made a Machiavellian puppet-master out of a lousy, flea-bitten mongrel! Was it beyond those powers to heal Timmy's mind?"

"I am not a psychopathic criminal."

"Do you imply that healing Timmy would involve repeating the swindle you worked on Homer?"

"No. I could have by-passed the simple neural block that was leaving Timmy helpless, and so have given him what to you would have seemed his normal intelligence. In addition, I could have completed the work that nature left incomplete in all of you, and so have released his full, enormous capabilities. I could have done all this—can still do it—and still leave Timmy's ego untouched, to develop in its own way, among its own kind, knowing nothing of me for what I am."

"But you haven't done so. Why? Why!"

"I dared not."

"Danger? From a small boy?"

"Deadly danger—danger of infection that might threaten every intelligent race in the galaxy and even spread across the great gulfs of space beyond..."

"All this from poor little Timmy?"

"From what he might thereby become."

"I'm licked." Phil threw out his hands angrily. "I try to get a straight answer and all I get is implications. You tell me an outrageous story, and I believe you. You tell me you've neatly arranged to break the hearts of two of my best friends, and I respect your good intentions in doing so. Why? I love you like a brother, but I'm ready to take a rock and crush your skull in for a monster. I mean it! I could kill Homer with a single kick! I could—"

"I know, and I'm afraid of that hysterical impulse. I know the nature of the struggle going on in your mind better than you do, but only you can fight for control. I must wait for the outcome. When you have control of yourself—"

"You're so bloody sane and smug you with your secondhand suit and hand-me-down knowledge!" He jumped up in a fury and turned his back on Timmy, addressing himself directly to Homer whose patient, pain-filled eyes held undeniable understanding. "Look at you! The telepathic genius with personal immortality—at a price only you could stomach! Too bad you got caught short and had to live in a cur! Tough, isn't it, having to wait for a mere moron to get control of himself! You know all the answers—why don't you control the situation?"

"Because the hand-me-down knowledge is no longer backed by the mental capacity of a Challon."

Phil stiffened as Tim's answering voice sounded behind him, quiet and friendly. Against his will, he turned back to the boy and seated himself again on the log. The boy's eyes caught and held his.

"The morality and outlook of the Challon are my morality and outlook, whether I wish it so or not." Tim might have been making a pleasantly inconsequential remark about the weather for all the importance he seemed to attach to his statement, yet his eyes held the strained, tight-lipped face. "The insight and understanding bequeathed by the Challon are sufficient to keep Homer's mind sane under long stress, and of course—"

His soothing voice went on and on, and presently his lungs expelled a soft breath of relief as Phil relaxed a trifle, still breathing raggedly. Alert eyes watched him mop his damp forehead but the quiet words flowed in an unhurried stream, soothing, distracting, keeping the thread intact. At last the crises seemed behind them. "... So I can only wait for you to absorb the emotional impact of what I've told you. I had planned to prepare you, to break it gently if I could, but ... you understand?" The voice paused, then repeated gently and insistently, "You understand, don't you?"

"Uh ... yes. Homer—"

"He can't last much longer, and so of course I can't. I've landed one kick after another right smack in your emotional solar plexus and you're trying to catch your wind." Tim's hand casually struck a match for the cigarette Phil had put unlit in his mouth and the man leaned forward automatically, puffed, and automatically muttered a word of thanks. The quiet voice went on, taking an even more casual note. "What with trying to examine the implications of everything at once,

you've stirred up a fine old Irish stew of fears, resentments and envies, all of them trying to reconcile the certain knowledge that I can be trusted and the essentially neurotic fear that I'm playing you for an almighty sucker.

"Remember, it has been even harder for me to reconcile myself to you human beings than it can possibly be for you to accept the existence of the Challon. The concept of telepathy is not a completely new or alien one to you, but the concept of a nontelepathic civilization was dismissed by the Challon ages ago as a simple contradiction of terms, a self-evident absurdity such as lifting oneself by one's bootstraps.

"It seemed so obvious that a civilized society could not develop without the capacity for intelligent coöperation, and intelligent coöperation of any real complexity was impossible without adequate communication. What means of communication could adequately replace the direct linking of mind and mind? Failing any answers short of fantasy, the proposition always remained a sort of classroom joke with us. In fact, several classic satires exist on the subject and one of the least successful—because it seemed too ridiculous—suggested an elaborately coded system of vocalizing. We have a very elementary spoken language and a more complex code of inscriptions for essential records, but neither the written nor the spoken system could possibly be called an adequate means of communication.

"I realize now that one of the satires was not the rather frightening effort that it seemed to be, but a brilliant scientific prediction of the probable development and history of a race of highly intelligent nontelepaths. The composer of the epic pointed out that where the culture and character of the Challon neither permitted nor desired concealment of any sort, a race that lacked adequate communication would have no choice but to live as disharmonious groups of strangers, never truly knowing either their fellows or themselves. He postulated what you now call traumatic experiences which, unrecognized and, therefore, untreated, would fester in secrecy from childhood onward until they manifested as compulsive drives or inhibitive complexes. He invented deranged emotions which you describe as 'guilt' and 'shame' and he showed how they would cause buried memories to erupt in changed form, lead to cankerous misunderstandings, cause unhealthy repressions, and foster frustrations.

"But his master-stroke—and this was pure genius, for it was almost inconceivable—was when he traced the development of his 'nontelepathic civilization' to the point where he predicted criminals, criminal and moral codes of unbelievable complexity, and a great multitude of harmful and illogical taboos, local customs, and regional superstitions. It was a superb achievement of creative imagination and scientific deduction—but not even its creator thought it was more than an exercise in fantasy and perhaps not in the best of taste. The basic assumption was simply too absurd for serious consideration."

"Yeah. I guess we were as indigestible to you as you are to me. Maybe I'm getting over it. Sorry ... uh ... Homer."

"Call me Tim. I don't think of myself

as Homer and my Challon identification is a mental-verbal linkage. Even 'Challon' is a compromise simplification."

"I guess it would be. Those cracks I made—"

"Forget them. To what you call the hag-ridden moron jittering out of sight in your mind, so many things equate to a threat to survival. And so many survival reactions outlast their usefulness, becoming essentially antisocial and antisurvival. For a telepathic race there are no false fronts or motives or impulses. In a nontelepathic society, nothing but false faces are ever seen."

"It's beginning to get home to me ... what about that night near the swamp?"

"My poor Challonari. The shockwave of 'my' death left it alert but bewildered. It could not recognize nontelepathic intelligences and tried to turn them aside like the first one. Their deaths are on my head—or on the organic dust that eight years ago was a Challon. The Challonari was confused by the contradictions of my present identity, subtly altered as it has been by Homer's channeling mind, and went insane when faced with a basic conflict of duties. It was like ... losing a simple child."

"So we return to Timmy."

"And to you."

"Me? I'm going downhill fast. Let's have it before I hit rock-bottom and really get around to reacting. And let's have a few straight answers. You could have by-passed the first block that makes Timmy an idiot. O. K., why didn't you?"

"I would have lost control of him at once, of course. For one thing, as an ordinary child his mind would be closed to me just as yours is and I would be a voiceless animal with no protector, my existence likely to end at the bottom of a river in a weighted sack."

"No dice. Remember, I know you too well to believe you'd place your own interests first, much as I hate to admit it."

"As Homer I might, survival being a basic drive. As the Challon-Homer, however, I needed a better reason than simple self-preservation. I have that better reason. It lies in you, in Timmy, and in all your kind. Perhaps you'll see the connection when I tell you that although the Challon are the most intelligent race yet known to exist, Homo sapiens is at present not far behind them. Only more efficient communication and the great strides that it makes possible has advanced the Challon culture and science so disproportionately far beyond your own."

"So the Challon are a bit brighter and a lot more advanced than we are. O. K., they seem like a good bunch ... or are they? Come to think of it, I saw them from your viewpoint which was predisposed to favor them." Another thought struck him and he fell silent for a moment. "You say we are almost their equal at present. What happens—if this inhibited potential you speak of—is released—if Man is made whole?"

The answer came quietly.

"You would have no equal in the known universe."

Phil's face grew thoughtful, sober, while the Challon-Homer watched through Tim's eyes the progress of a calculated gamble.

"Would the Challon—resent—our becoming superior?"

"For the same reason that the present Challon superiority is not resented by races of lower intelligence, they would not themselves resent the appearance of intellects far greater than their own."

"I have a feeling there's a lot more in that answer than meets the eye. Can you estimate to what extent we would surpass the Challon?"

"If my Challon memory serves me, they had no knowledge of any mind-structure of a capacity remotely approaching that of Man. It is a maze, incredibly complex, with far-reaching resources I can only guess at. The Challon part of my mind has the profoundest admiration for a superb mechanism it can only dimly comprehend, but beneath the Challon"—the voice dropped almost to a whisper—"beneath the Challon is the dog, and the dog sees his god." The power of that factor he had not considered.

Phil laughed uneasily, both shocked and repelled.

"I hope you're joking. We sound like the sweet-smelling Flower of Creation! When a dog reaches the level you ... um ... Homer has, it becomes Man's equal, not his pet."

"Until Man's advance thrusts the dog back to an even lower relative position, as it inevitably must when ... if ... Man comes into his own. I told you I dared not leave myself isolated and speechless by clearing the simple short-circuit immobilizing Timmy. Now you see why I dared not go even farther and release—untrained and with no hope of adequate training—the true Homo superior, the transcendent man."

"That's like turning a tiger loose in a kindergarten! Give a man a really high-powered intellect and for all his shortcomings—"

"The intellect is nothing. The data, the circumstances, the influences, the environment that shape the intellect, these are what count. Your theorists say that although Man may some day create wonderful mechanical brains with a creative capacity almost equal to Man's own, you can never create a brain that is your superior. That is true, and the reasoning is obvious. In a more limited sense, your body repairs itself daily but it cannot improve on itself, it cannot spontaneously develop functions it never had—it cannot even repair severe damage without outside help. The same applies to the mind. A sick mind cannot achieve the objectivity needed to repair itself, if the damage is too great. No, the intellect is nothing until it learns. What would Timmy have learned, and from whom? Take a minute to think of all the connotations." Phil thought of some of them, uneasily. "Assume that from the start his status as Homo superior was recognized ... is that a fair assumption?"

"It ... ah ... would sooner or later become apparent."

"After how much damage had been done that could not be undone, since Homo sapiens cannot ever be competent to guide and train Homo superior?"

"Well ... what about what he could learn from your Challon mind?"

"I would have no voice and no assurance that telepathy would be possible.

No influence that I could exert on him at any time could hold him, if other factors impelled him to break free. A few months ago I recalled a formula known to the Challon and with nothing more than household chemicals prepared the quick and harmless anaesthetic I used with you. What brought it to mind was a side-reaction reported as a curiosity in one of the scientific journals Jerr ... Dad subscribes to. It had an unexpected side-reaction for me, too, making direct telepathic contact possible with you, but only under difficult and limited conditions.''

''There's a fortune in that alone—''

''That was an unworthy thought, Phil, typical of insecurity. I dare not turn loose an immature, untrained, Homo superior, the only one of his kind.''

''But why the only one? Why not others as well so that they could work in unison?''

''Don't you understand yet? You are not sane! This planet is a hell-house of disordered personalities, a place of horror, a plague-spot. Suppose I had retained Timmy as my voice and planned on releasing the inhibited potential of many people. I would have to start with one man and that one man would at once become my master! If he wished, he could be the master of all the earth. Could I risk that?''

''We have men of good moral character—''

''By what standards acceptable to all? A good churchman, perhaps, whose first thought would be to bring everyone into the saving grace of his religion? Or an atheist, who would take care that no rascally churchman got the upper hand? Can you think of any man who does not have strong opinions on at least one subject? Who does not have one thing that he is a little bit more afraid of than anything else? One man who could be raised to power first and not insist on at least one positive or negative qualification for all who were permitted to follow? Something they must either be or not be? Yourself, for example.

''Would you suggest that a Russian be chosen first? Or a Frenchman or an Englishman? Or am I wrong in thinking you would 'naturally' want one of your own countrymen to be chosen, purely as a precaution? But which one of your countrymen? Among all your acquaintances, is there even one whom you would trust not to react emotionally on at least one count, thus automatically rendering him unfit to play god? Bearing in mind that the first human being to find his full potential placed at his command will be a titan with the power to prevent any peer being raised to oppose him, would you feel safe with the choice of anyone except—yourself?''

''Are we that bad?''

''At birth, no, but from birth onward you are exposed to infection and you sicken to a greater or lesser degree depending on the concentration of infection around you. Let me answer you this way. Suppose the spaceship were found and examined, what would happen? Among other tools there is a prospecting instrument on board that is a rough approximation of a disintegration beam—it punches neat holes in solid rock by a process that leaves an exceedingly heavy dust behind—for a short while. Then something happens to the molecular

bonds of the heavy dust, and the little holes become very big holes. Its principles would take you some years to work out, but its manufacture and operation are fairly obvious. What would be the fate of that very useful tool?''

''I can't deny that its possibilities as a weapon would be seized upon, but with such a weapon—''

''Ah, yes—no one would dare to go to war. At any rate, not with the country possessing the weapon.''

''It could stop all war.''

''If your part of the world threatened the other part of the world and put a halo around the 'or else'. What would the other part of the world do when the first news of the spaceship leaked out, as it would do immediately?''

''O. K.—I guess you know as well as I do.''

''I'm not trying to ride you, Phil, but I want you to see that Fear and a desire for the security you can never know in your present state dominate almost every important act. As a people, a race, a species, you are unsane. What am I to do? To die in peace, leaving you as you are, without hope or help, is against every Challon instinct. To leave unrealized the human potential with its tremendous promise is unthinkable. Your race might destroy itself before your secret is rediscovered millennia from now, and the greatest wonder of creation be lost forever. Even the spaceship which I have failed to destroy with its innocent secrets, could destroy you simply by being found. What am I to do?''

''I ... think you already have an answer.''

''Yes, with your consent and only with your consent.''

''You have it.''

''You don't know—''

''You have it, I said. I trust you.''

''Man puts his faith in Dog? Well, it will not be for the first time. Remember us, Man, when you come into your own. Now—I must invade your mind, without reserve. You understand? Nothing known to you will be unknown to me. Are you willing?''

''Another of those Mickey Finns?''

''Yes, it is the only way. I will plant certain inflexible prohibitions which will forever destroy your self-will in regard to certain courses of action—they will be ones which you might at some time feel to be wise, but which I know to be ultimately destructive. In return, I can give you a measure of sanity greater than you have known. You will lose your hags, but you will never be entirely your own master again. You will follow the course I have planned for you for the rest of your life. It is the best I can do with my limited ability, and I cannot guarantee that I am doing what is right.''

''And Timmy?''

''I have already seeded in his memory banks—a careful and painstaking job this time!—all the memories and knowledge appropriate to the boy his parents think him to have been, plus other information which will become available to him at the right time. Every day for eight years I gave him the memories for that day, planning for the time when I could pay my debt by releasing him.''

''You take eight years that were oth-

erwise useless to him and give him the rest of his life for his own. Fair enough."

"No, his life is not his own. It belongs to his whole race. Your work will be to supervise his training until the time is ripe, and then to awaken the dormant memories that will tell him what has happened between us."

"How do I do that?"

"Think of it as long-term posthypnotic suggestion. It is one of the least complicated matters to arrange. A simple, spoken phrase that you will not remember until the right moment will be sufficient to trigger the memory release. We must hurry now. Homer's breathing—can you hear it? His lungs have almost failed. After I enter your mind, my last act will be to release the simple block that makes Timmy an imbecile ... he will awaken and not know that he has slept all his life until this moment when he becomes in actuality an ordinary, quite intelligent boy. He will not grieve unduly for Homer, and I who have two bodies and am at home in neither of them will be a record that will finally be erased. Are you ready?"

"No—wait. I must know what all this is leading to!"

"We have so little time! Well, then, it is leading to broken hearts, to hatred, and to injustice. Perhaps to martyrdom, perhaps to glory. If my plans fail, your lot will be public anathema as a fool or a murderer, for I will prohibit you from ever clearing yourself by speaking the truth about it."

"Who would believe it!"

"Enough would become curious. A little research along the right lines and you would prematurely learn your own secret. Then a race of mad demigods would be loosed through the void, an all-conquering scourge instead of a blessing. I would sooner have your whole race die with your very existence unsuspected, than have you live in infamy, the unchecked tyrants of the stars. Not even the Challon could stand against you, nor could they coerce a single one of you whose whole potential had been released."

"Then what hope—"

"Timmy's newly-awakened mind will be completely sane. The aids I have given it may keep it sufficiently sane for the next few years, despite infection on all sides. In those years you will watch over him and accumulate the funds that will be needed. That will not be difficult. You must buy the lands surrounding the spaceship and build a laboratory where you will conduct some dangerous experiments, thus explaining the need for an isolated location. The laboratory is only a blind. The ship must be freed from the swamp and repaired in some minor respects, then an 'accidental explosion' one night will destroy the buildings to cover the take-off. Timmy will be presumed killed in the explosion. His parents will grieve, the public may blame you, and you will sink into obscurity. You may live long enough to learn whether Timmy ever succeeded in reaching Challon in a spaceship not designed for his race. My memories and implanted commands will constantly guide and instruct him—"

"How ... how old must he be?"

"As young as possible. As soon as all is ready. Tomorrow, if that were pos-

sible."

"A child!"

"For at least a little while he will be more than the equal of a 'good' man. Child, or youth, or man, I will free him from fear and loneliness on the long voyage. If he reaches Challon, they will understand and perhaps not think I have blundered too badly. They will heal him, study him, free him. Then it will be his problem to free his race. If you are very lucky, you may still be alive at that time."

"And if he never reaches—"

"You will never know. Are you ready?"

Phil looked desperately at the setting sun and the long, long shadows, as though he were a doomed man awaiting execution.

"Get on with it," he said huskily.

Very little happened. There was a small lapse of time during which an observer would have seen certain lines of tension vanish almost magically from the man's face—might even have thought that some years seemed to drop from his age. Presently the man roused himself, stretching with the careless vigor of a youth as he experienced a serene peace of mind that he had not known since he was very young indeed. He glanced casually at the boy seated near him—a boy who looked at the world with an air of fleeting puzzlement—then dropped on his knees and cradled an ugly, grizzled head in his arms. A last flicker enlivened the eyes and a dry tongue touched his hand just once.

That was all.

THE SKULL

Conger agreed to kill a stranger he had never seen. But he would make no mistakes because he had the stranger's skull under his arm.

"What is this opportunity?" Conger asked. "Go on. I'm interested."

The room was silent; all faces were fixed on Conger—still in the drab prison uniform. The Speaker leaned forward slowly.

"Before you went to prison your trading business was paying well—all illegal—all very profitable. Now you have nothing, except the prospect of another six years in a cell."

Conger scowled.

"There is a certain situation, very important to this Council, that requires your peculiar abilities. Also, it is a situation you might find interesting. You were a hunter, were you not? You've done a great deal of trapping, hiding in the bushes, waiting at night for the game? I imagine hunting must be a source of satisfaction to you, the chase, the stalking..."

Conger sighed. His lips twisted. "All right," he said. "Leave that out. Get to the point. Who do you want me to kill?"

The Speaker smiled. "All in proper sequence," he said softly.

The car slid to a stop. It was night; there was no light anywhere along the street. Conger looked out. "Where are we? What is this place?"

The hand of the guard pressed into his arm. "Come. Through that door."

Conger stepped down, onto the damp sidewalk. The guard came swiftly after him, and then the Speaker. Conger took a deep breath of the cold air. He studied the dim outline of the building rising up before them.

"I know this place. I've seen it before." He squinted, his eyes growing accustomed to the dark. Suddenly he became alert. "This is—"

"Yes. The First Church." The Speaker walked toward the steps. "We're expected."

"Expected? Here?"

"Yes." The Speaker mounted the stairs. "You know we're not allowed in their Churches, especially with guns!" He stopped. Two armed soldiers loomed up ahead, one on each side.

"All right?" The Speaker looked up at them. They nodded. The door of the Church was open. Conger could see other soldiers inside, standing about, young soldiers with large eyes, gazing at the ikons and holy images.

"I see," he said.

"It was necessary," the Speaker said. "As you know, we have been singularly unfortunate in the past in our relations with the First Church."

"This won't help."

"But it's worth it. You will see."

They passed through the hall and into the main chamber where the altar piece was, and the kneeling places. The Speaker scarcely glanced at the altar as they passed by. He pushed open a small side door and beckoned Conger through.

"In here. We have to hurry. The faithful will be flocking in soon."

Conger entered, blinking. They were in a small chamber, low-ceilinged, with dark panels of old wood. There was a smell of ashes and smoldering spices in the room. He sniffed. "What's that? The smell."

"Cups on the wall. I don't know." The Speaker crossed impatiently to the far side. "According to our information, it is hidden here by this—"

Conger looked around the room. He saw books and papers, holy signs and images. A strange low shiver went through him.

"Does my job involve anyone of the Church? If it does—"

The Speaker turned, astonished. "Can it be that you believe in the Founder? Is it possible, a hunter, a killer—"

"No. Of course not. All their business about resignation to death, non-violence—"

"What is it, then?"

Conger shrugged. "I've been taught not to mix with such as these. They have strange abilities. And you can't reason with them."

The Speaker studied Conger thoughtfully. "You have the wrong idea. It is no one here that we have in mind. We've found that killing them only tends to increase their numbers."

"Then why come here? Let's leave."

"No. We came for something important. Something you will need to identify your man. Without it you won't be able to find him." A trace of a smile crossed the Speaker's face. "We don't want you

to kill the wrong person. It's too important."

"I don't make mistakes." Conger's chest rose. "Listen, Speaker—"

"This is an unusual situation," the Speaker said. "You see, the person you are after—the person that we are sending you to find—is known only by certain objects here. They are the only traces, the only means of identification. Without them—"

"What are they?"

He came toward the Speaker. The Speaker moved to one side. "Look," he said. He drew a sliding wall away, showing a dark square hole. "In there."

Conger squatted down, staring in. He frowned. "A skull! A skeleton!"

"The man you are after has been dead for two centuries," the Speaker said. "This is all that remains of him. And this is all you have with which to find him."

For a long time Conger said nothing. He stared down at the bones, dimly visible in the recess of the wall. How could a man dead centuries be killed? How could he be stalked, brought down?

Conger was a hunter, a man who had lived as he pleased, where he pleased. He had kept himself alive by trading, bringing furs and pelts in from the Provinces on his own ship, riding at high speed, slipping through the customs line around Earth.

He had hunted in the great mountains of the moon. He had stalked through empty Martian cities. He had explored—

The Speaker said, "Soldier, take these objects and have them carried to the car. Don't lose any part of them."

The soldier went into the cupboard, reaching gingerly, squatting on his heels.

"It is my hope," the Speaker continued softly, to Conger, "that you will demonstrate your loyalty to us, now. There are always ways for citizens to restore themselves, to show their devotion to their society. For you I think this would be a very good chance. I seriously doubt that a better one will come. And for your efforts there will be quite a restitution, of course."

The two men looked at each other; Conger, thin, unkempt, the Speaker immaculate in his uniform.

"I understand you," Conger said. "I mean, I understand this part, about the chance. But how can a man who has been dead two centuries be—"

"I'll explain later," the Speaker said. "Right now we have to hurry!" The soldier had gone out with the bones, wrapped in a blanket held carefully in his arms. The Speaker walked to the door. "Come. They've already discovered that we've broken in here, and they'll be coming at any moment."

They hurried down the damp steps to the waiting car. A second later the driver lifted the car up into the air, above the house-tops.

The Speaker settled back in the seat.

"The First Church has an interesting past," he said. "I suppose you are familiar with it, but I'd like to speak of a few points that are of relevancy to us.

"It was in the twentieth century that the Movement began—during one of the periodic wars. The Movement developed rapidly, feeding on the general sense of futility, the realization that each

war was breeding greater war, with no end in sight. The Movement posed a simple answer to the problem: Without military preparations—weapons—there could be no war. And without machinery and complex scientific technocracy there could be no weapons.

"The Movement preached that you couldn't stop war by planning for it. They preached that man was losing to his machinery and science, that it was getting away from him, pushing him into greater and greater wars. Down with society, they shouted. Down with factories and science! A few more wars and there wouldn't be much left of the world.

"The Founder was an obscure person from a small town in the American Middle West. We don't even know his name. All we know is that one day he appeared, preaching a doctrine of non-violence, non-resistance; no fighting, no paying taxes for guns, no research except for medicine. Live out your life quietly, tending your garden, staying out of public affairs; mind your own business. Be obscure, unknown, poor. Give away most of your possessions, leave the city. At least that was what developed from what he told the people."

The car dropped down and landed on a roof.

"The Founder preached this doctrine, or the germ of it; there's no telling how much the faithful have added themselves. The local authorities picked him up at once, of course. Apparently they were convinced that he meant it; he was never released. He was put to death, and his body buried secretly. It seemed that the cult was finished."

The Speaker smiled. "Unfortunately, some of his disciples reported seeing him after the date of his death. The rumor spread; he had conquered death, he was divine. It took hold, grew. And here we are today, with a First Church, obstructing all social progress, destroying society, sowing the seeds of anarchy—"

"But the wars," Conger said. "About them?"

"The wars? Well, there were no more wars. It must be acknowledged that the elimination of war was the direct result of non-violence practiced on a general scale. But we can take a more objective view of war today. What was so terrible about it? War had a profound selective value, perfectly in accord with the teachings of Darwin and Mendel and others. Without war the mass of useless, incompetent mankind, without training or intelligence, is permitted to grow and expand unchecked. War acted to reduce their numbers; like storms and earthquakes and droughts, it was nature's way of eliminating the unfit.

"Without war the lower elements of mankind have increased all out of proportion. They threaten the educated few, those with scientific knowledge and training, the ones equipped to direct society. They have no regard for science or a scientific society, based on reason. And this Movement seeks to aid and abet them. Only when scientists are in full control can the—"

He looked at his watch and then kicked the car door open. "I'll tell you the rest as we walk."

They crossed the dark roof. "Doubtless you now know whom those bones

belonged to, who it is that we are after. He has been dead just two centuries, now, this ignorant man from the Middle West, this Founder. The tragedy is that the authorities of the time acted too slowly. They allowed him to speak, to get his message across. He was allowed to preach, to start his cult. And once such a thing is under way, there's no stopping it.

"But what if he had died before he preached? What if none of his doctrines had ever been spoken? It took only a moment for him to utter them, that we know. They say he spoke just once, just one time. Then the authorities came, taking him away. He offered no resistance; the incident was small."

The Speaker turned to Conger.

"Small, but we're reaping the consequences of it today."

They went inside the building. Inside, the soldiers had already laid out the skeleton on a table. The soldiers stood around it, their young faces intense.

Conger went over to the table, pushing past them. He bent down, staring at the bones. "So these are his remains," he murmured. "The Founder. The Church has hidden them for two centuries."

"Quite so," the Speaker said. "But now we have them. Come along down the hall."

They went across the room to a door. The Speaker pushed it open. Technicians looked up. Conger saw machinery, whirring and turning; benches and retorts. In the center of the room was a gleaming crystal cage.

The Speaker handed a Slem-gun to Conger. "The important thing to remember is that the skull must be saved and brought back—for comparison and proof. Aim low—at the chest."

Conger weighed the gun in his hands. "It feels good," he said. "I know this gun—that is, I've seen them before, but I never used one."

The Speaker nodded. "You will be instructed on the use of the gun and the operation of the cage. You will be given all data we have on the time and location. The exact spot was a place called Hudson's field. About 1960 in a small community outside Denver, Colorado. And don't forget—the only means of identification you will have will be the skull. There are visible characteristics of the front teeth, especially the left incisor—"

Conger listened absently. He was watching two men in white carefully wrapping the skull in a plastic bag. They tied it and carried it into the crystal cage. "And if I should make a mistake?"

"Pick the wrong man? Then find the right one. Don't come back until you succeed in reaching this Founder. And you can't wait for him to start speaking; that's what we must avoid! You must act in advance. Take chances; shoot as soon as you think you've found him. He'll be someone unusual, probably a stranger in the area. Apparently he wasn't known."

Conger listened dimly.

"Do you think you have it all now?" the Speaker asked.

"Yes. I think so." Conger entered the crystal cage and sat down, placing his hands on the wheel.

"Good luck," the Speaker said.

"We'll be awaiting the outcome.

There's some philosophical doubt as to whether one can alter the past. This should answer the question once and for all."

Conger fingered the controls of the cage.

"By the way," the Speaker said. "Don't try to use this cage for purposes not anticipated in your job. We have a constant trace on it. If we want it back, we can get it back. Good luck."

Conger said nothing. The cage was sealed. He raised his finger and touched the wheel control. He turned the wheel carefully.

He was still staring at the plastic bag when the room outside vanished.

For a long time there was nothing at all. Nothing beyond the crystal mesh of the cage. Thoughts rushed through Conger's mind, helter-skelter. How would he know the man? How could he be certain, in advance? What had he looked like? What was his name? How had he acted, before he spoke? Would he be an ordinary person, or some strange outlandish crank?

Conger picked up the Slem-gun and held it against his cheek. The metal of the gun was cool and smooth. He practiced moving the sight. It was a beautiful gun, the kind of gun he could fall in love with. If he had owned such a gun in the Martian desert—on the long nights when he had lain, cramped and numbed with cold, waiting for things that moved through the darkness—

He put the gun down and adjusted the meter readings of the cage. The spiraling mist was beginning to condense and settle. All at once forms wavered and fluttered around him.

Colors, sounds, movements filtered through the crystal wire. He clamped the controls off and stood up.

He was on a ridge overlooking a small town. It was high noon. The air was crisp and bright. A few automobiles moved along a road. Off in the distance were some level fields. Conger went to the door and stepped outside. He sniffed the air. Then he went back into the cage.

He stood before the mirror over the shelf, examining his features. He had trimmed his beard—they had not got him to cut it off—and his hair was neat. He was dressed in the clothing of the middle-twentieth century, the odd collar and coat, the shoes of animal hide. In his pocket was money of the times. That was important. Nothing more was needed.

Nothing, except his ability, his special cunning. But he had never used it in such a way before.

He walked down the road toward the town.

The first things he noticed were the newspapers on the stands. April 5, 1961. He was not too far off. He looked around him. There was a filling station, a garage, some taverns, and a ten-cent store. Down the street was a grocery store and some public buildings.

A few minutes later he mounted the stairs of the little public library and passed through the doors into the warm interior.

The librarian looked up, smiling.

"Good afternoon," she said.

He smiled, not speaking because his words would not be correct; accented and strange, probably. He went over to

a table and sat down by a heap of magazines. For a moment he glanced through them. Then he was on his feet again. He crossed the room to a wide rack against the wall. His heart began to beat heavily.

Newspapers—weeks on end. He took a roll of them over to the table and began to scan them quickly. The print was odd, the letters strange. Some of the words were unfamiliar.

He set the papers aside and searched farther. At last he found what he wanted. He carried the Cherrywood Gazette to the table and opened it to the first page. He found what he wanted:

PRISONER HANGS SELF

An unidentified man, held by the county sheriff's office for suspicion of criminal syndicalism, was found dead this morning, by—

He finished the item. It was vague, uninforming. He needed more. He carried the Gazette back to the racks and then, after a moment's hesitation, approached the librarian.

"More?" he asked. "More papers. Old ones?"

She frowned. "How old? Which papers?"

"Months old. And—before."

"Of the Gazette? This is all we have. What did you want? What are you looking for? Maybe I can help you."

He was silent.

"You might find older issues at the Gazette office," the woman said, taking off her glasses. "Why don't you try there? But if you'd tell me, maybe I could help you—"

He went out.

The Gazette office was down a side street; the sidewalk was broken and cracked. He went inside. A heater glowed in the corner of the small office. A heavy-set man stood up and came slowly over to the counter.

"What did you want, mister?" he said.

"Old papers. A month. Or more."

"To buy? You want to buy them?"

"Yes." He held out some of the money he had. The man stared.

"Sure," he said. "Sure. Wait a minute." He went quickly out of the room. When he came back he was staggering under the weight of his armload, his face red. "Here are some," he grunted. "Took what I could find. Covers the whole year. And if you want more—"

Conger carried the papers outside. He sat down by the road and began to go through them.

What he wanted was four months back, in December. It was a tiny item, so small that he almost missed it. His hands trembled as he scanned it, using the small dictionary for some of the archaic terms.

MAN ARRESTED FOR UNLICENSED DEMONSTRATION

An unidentified man who refused to give his name was picked up in Cooper Creek by special agents of the sheriff's office, according to Sheriff Duff. It was said the man was recently noticed in this area and had been watched continually. It was—

Cooper Creek. December, 1960. His heart pounded. That was all he needed

to know. He stood up, shaking himself, stamping his feet on the cold ground. The sun had moved across the sky to the very edge of the hills. He smiled. Already he had discovered the exact time and place. Now he needed only to go back, perhaps to November, to Cooper Creek—

He walked back through the main section of town, past the library, past the grocery store. It would not be hard; the hard part was over. He would go there; rent a room, prepare to wait until the man appeared.

He turned the corner. A woman was coming out of a doorway, loaded down with packages. Conger stepped aside to let her pass. The woman glanced at him. Suddenly her face turned white. She stared, her mouth open.

Conger hurried on. He looked back. What was wrong with her? The woman was still staring; she had dropped the packages to the ground. He increased his speed. He turned a second corner and went up a side street. When he looked back again the woman had come to the entrance of the street and was starting after him. A man joined her, and the two of them began to run toward him.

He lost them and left the town, striding quickly, easily, up into the hills at the edge of town. When he reached the cage he stopped. What had happened? Was it something about his clothing? His dress?

He pondered. Then, as the sun set, he stepped into the cage.

Conger sat before the wheel. For a moment he waited, his hands resting lightly on the control. Then he turned the wheel, just a little, following the control readings carefully.

The grayness settled down around him.

But not for very long.

The man looked him over critically. "You better come inside," he said. "Out of the cold."

"Thanks." Conger went gratefully through the open door, into the living-room. It was warm and close from the heat of the little kerosene heater in the corner. A woman, large and shapeless in her flowered dress, came from the kitchen. She and the man studied him critically.

"It's a good room," the woman said. "I'm Mrs. Appleton. It's got heat. You need that this time of year."

"Yes." He nodded, looking around.

"You want to eat with us?"

"What?"

"You want to eat with us?" The man's brows knitted. "You're not a foreigner, are you, mister?"

"No." He smiled. "I was born in this country. Quite far west, though."

"California?"

"No." He hesitated. "In Oregon."

"What's it like up there?" Mrs. Appleton asked. "I hear there's a lot of trees and green. It's so barren here. I come from Chicago, myself."

"That's the Middle West," the man said to her. "You ain't no foreigner."

"Oregon isn't foreign, either," Conger said. "It's part of the United States."

The man nodded absently. He was staring at Conger's clothing.

"That's a funny suit you got on, mister," he said. "Where'd you get that?"

Conger was lost. He shifted uneasily.

"It's a good suit," he said. "Maybe I better go some other place, if you don't want me here."

They both raised their hands protestingly. The woman smiled at him. "We just have to look out for those Reds. You know, the government is always warning us about them."

"The Reds?" He was puzzled.

"The government says they're all around. We're supposed to report anything strange or unusual, anybody doesn't act normal."

"Like me?"

They looked embarrassed. "Well, you don't look like a Red to me," the man said. "But we have to be careful. The Tribune says—"

Conger half listened. It was going to be easier than he had thought. Clearly, he would know as soon as the Founder appeared. These people, so suspicious of anything different, would be buzzing and gossiping and spreading the story. All he had to do was lie low and listen, down at the general store, perhaps. Or even here, in Mrs. Appleton's boarding house.

"Can I see the room?" he said.

"Certainly." Mrs. Appleton went to the stairs. "I'll be glad to show it to you."

They went upstairs. It was colder upstairs, but not nearly as cold as outside. Nor as cold as nights on the Martian deserts. For that he was grateful.

He was walking slowly around the store, looking at the cans of vegetables, the frozen packages of fish and meats shining and clean in the open refrigerator counters.

Ed Davies came toward him. "Can I help you?" he said. The man was a little oddly dressed, and with a beard! Ed couldn't help smiling.

"Nothing," the man said in a funny voice. "Just looking."

"Sure," Ed said. He walked back behind the counter. Mrs. Hacket was wheeling her cart up.

"Who's he?" she whispered, her sharp face turned, her nose moving, as if it were sniffing. "I never seen him before."

"I don't know."

"Looks funny to me. Why does he wear a beard? No one else wears a beard. Must be something the matter with him."

"Maybe he likes to wear a beard. I had an uncle who—"

"Wait." Mrs. Hacket stiffened. "Didn't that—what was his name? The Red—that old one. Didn't he have a beard? Marx. He had a beard."

Ed laughed. "This ain't Karl Marx. I saw a photograph of him once."

Mrs. Hacket was staring at him. "You did?"

"Sure." He flushed a little. "What's the matter with that?"

"I'd sure like to know more about him," Mrs. Hacket said. "I think we ought to know more, for our own good."

"Hey, mister! Want a ride?"

Conger turned quickly, dropping his hand to his belt. He relaxed. Two young kids in a car, a girl and a boy. He smiled at them. "A ride? Sure."

Conger got into the car and closed the door. Bill Willet pushed the gas and the car roared down the highway.

"I appreciate a ride," Conger said carefully. "I was taking a walk between towns, but it was farther than I thought."

"Where are you from?" Lora Hunt asked. She was pretty, small and dark, in her yellow sweater and blue skirt.

"From Cooper Creek."

"Cooper Creek?" Bill said. He frowned. "That's funny. I don't remember seeing you before."

"Why, do you come from there?"

"I was born there. I know everybody there."

"I just moved in. From Oregon."

"From Oregon? I didn't know Oregon people had accents."

"Do I have an accent?"

"You use words funny."

"How?"

"I don't know. Doesn't he, Lora?"

"You slur them," Lora said, smiling. "Talk some more. I'm interested in dialects." She glanced at him, white-teethed. Conger felt his heart constrict.

"I have a speech impediment."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

They looked at him curiously as the car purred along. Conger for his part was struggling to find some way of asking them questions without seeming curious. "I guess people from out of town don't come here much," he said. "Strangers."

"No." Bill shook his head. "Not very much."

"I'll bet I'm the first outsider for a long time."

"I guess so."

Conger hesitated. "A friend of mine—someone I know, might be coming through here. Where do you suppose I might—" He stopped. "Would there be anyone certain to see him? Someone I could ask, make sure I don't miss him if he comes?"

They were puzzled. "Just keep your eyes open. Cooper Creek isn't very big."

"No. That's right."

They drove in silence. Conger studied the outline of the girl. Probably she was the boy's mistress. Perhaps she was his trial wife. Or had they developed trial marriage back so far? He could not remember. But surely such an attractive girl would be someone's mistress by this time; she would be sixteen or so, by her looks. He might ask her sometime, if they ever met again.

The next day Conger went walking along the one main street of Cooper Creek. He passed the general store, the two filling stations, and then the post office. At the corner was the soda fountain.

He stopped. Lora was sitting inside, talking to the clerk. She was laughing, rocking back and forth.

Conger pushed the door open. Warm air rushed around him. Lora was drinking hot chocolate, with whipped cream. She looked up in surprise as he slid into the seat beside her.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Am I intruding?"

"No." She shook her head. Her eyes were large and dark. "Not at all."

The clerk came over. "What do you want?"

Conger looked at the chocolate. "Same as she has."

Lora was watching Conger, her arms folded, elbows on the counter. She

smiled at him. "By the way. You don't know my name. Lora Hunt."

She was holding out her hand. He took it awkwardly, not knowing what to do with it. "Conger is my name," he murmured.

"Conger? Is that your last or first name?"

"Last or first?" He hesitated. "Last. Omar Conger."

"Omar?" She laughed. "That's like the poet, Omar Khayyam."

"I don't know of him. I know very little of poets. We restored very few works of art. Usually only the Church has been interested enough—" He broke off. She was staring. He flushed. "Where I come from," he finished.

"The Church? Which church do you mean?"

"The Church." He was confused. The chocolate came and he began to sip it gratefully. Lora was still watching him.

"You're an unusual person," she said. "Bill didn't like you, but he never likes anything different. He's so—so prosaic. Don't you think that when a person gets older he should become—broadened in his outlook?"

Conger nodded.

"He says foreign people ought to stay where they belong, not come here. But you're not so foreign. He means orientals; you know."

Conger nodded.

The screen door opened behind them. Bill came into the room. He stared at them. "Well," he said.

Conger turned. "Hello."

"Well." Bill sat down. "Hello, Lora." He was looking at Conger. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Conger tensed. He could feel the hostility of the boy. "Something wrong with that?"

"No. Nothing wrong with it."

There was silence. Suddenly Bill turned to Lora. "Come on. Let's go."

"Go?" She was astonished. "Why?"

"Just go!" He grabbed her hand. "Come on! The car's outside."

"Why, Bill Willet," Lora said. "You're jealous!"

"Who is this guy?" Bill said. "Do you know anything about him? Look at him, his beard—"

She flared. "So what? Just because he doesn't drive a Packard and go to Cooper High!"

Conger sized the boy up. He was big—big and strong. Probably he was part of some civil control organization.

"Sorry," Conger said. "I'll go."

"What's your business in town?" Bill asked. "What are you doing here? Why are you hanging around Lora?"

Conger looked at the girl. He shrugged. "No reason. I'll see you later."

He turned away. And froze. Bill had moved. Conger's fingers went to his belt. Half pressure, he whispered to himself. No more. Half pressure.

He squeezed. The room leaped around him. He himself was protected by the lining of his clothing, the plastic sheathing inside.

"My God—" Lora put her hands up. Conger cursed. He hadn't meant any of it for her. But it would wear off. There was only a half-amp to it. It would tingle.

Tingle, and paralyze.

He walked out the door without looking back. He was almost to the corner when Bill came slowly out, holding onto the wall like a drunken man. Conger went on.

As Conger walked, restless, in the night, a form loomed in front of him. He stopped, holding his breath.

"Who is it?" a man's voice came. Conger waited, tense.

"Who is it?" the man said again. He clicked something in his hand. A light flashed. Conger moved.

"It's me," he said.

"Who is 'me'?"

"Conger is my name. I'm staying at the Appleton's place. Who are you?"

The man came slowly up to him. He was wearing a leather jacket. There was a gun at his waist.

"I'm Sheriff Duff. I think you're the person I want to talk to. You were in Bloom's today, about three o'clock?"

"Bloom's?"

"The fountain. Where the kids hang out." Duff came up beside him, shining his light into Conger's face. Conger blinked.

"Turn that thing away," he said.

A pause. "All right." The light flickered to the ground. "You were there. Some trouble broke out between you and the Willet boy. Is that right? You had a beef over his girl—"

"We had a discussion," Conger said carefully.

"Then what happened?"

"Why?"

"I'm just curious. They say you did something."

"Did something? Did what?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm wondering. They saw a flash, and something seemed to happen. They all blacked out. Couldn't move."

"How are they now?"

"All right."

There was silence.

"Well?" Duff said. "What was it? A bomb?"

"A bomb?" Conger laughed. "No. My cigarette lighter caught fire. There was a leak, and the fluid ignited."

"Why did they all pass out?"

"Fumes."

Silence. Conger shifted, waiting. His fingers moved slowly toward his belt. The Sheriff glanced down. He grunted.

"If you say so," he said. "Anyhow, there wasn't any real harm done." He stepped back from Conger. "And that Willet is a trouble-maker."

"Good night, then," Conger said. He started past the Sheriff.

"One more thing, Mr. Conger. Before you go. You don't mind if I look at your identification, do you?"

"No. Not at all." Conger reached into his pocket. He held his wallet out. The Sheriff took it and shined his flashlight on it. Conger watched, breathing shallowly. They had worked hard on the wallet, studying historic documents, relics of the times, all the papers they felt would be relevant.

Duff handed it back. "Okay. Sorry to bother you." The light winked off.

When Conger reached the house he found the Appletons sitting around the

television set. They did not look up as he came in. He lingered at the door.

"Can I ask you something?" he said. Mrs. Appleton turned slowly. "Can I ask you—what's the date?"

"The date?" She studied him. "The first of December."

"December first! Why, it was just November!"

They were all looking at him. Suddenly he remembered. In the twentieth century they still used the old twelve-month system. November fed directly into December; there was no Quartember between.

He gasped. Then it was tomorrow! The second of December! Tomorrow!

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks."

He went up the stairs. What a fool he was, forgetting. The Founder had been taken into captivity on the second of December, according to the newspaper records. Tomorrow, only twelve hours hence, the Founder would appear to speak to the people and then be dragged away.

The day was warm and bright. Conger's shoes crunched the melting crust of snow. On he went, through the trees heavy with white. He climbed a hill and strode down the other side, sliding as he went.

He stopped to look around. Everything was silent. There was no one in sight. He brought a thin rod from his waist and turned the handle of it. For a moment nothing happened. Then there was a shimmering in the air.

The crystal cage appeared and settled slowly down. Conger sighed. It was good to see it again. After all, it was his only way back.

He walked up on the ridge. He looked around with some satisfaction, his hands on his hips. Hudson's field was spread out, all the way to the beginning of town. It was bare and flat, covered with a thin layer of snow.

Here, the Founder would come. Here, he would speak to them. And here the authorities would take him.

Only he would be dead before they came. He would be dead before he even spoke.

Conger returned to the crystal globe. He pushed through the door and stepped inside. He took the Slem-gun from the shelf and screwed the bolt into place. It was ready to go, ready to fire. For a moment he considered. Should he have it with him?

No. It might be hours before the Founder came, and suppose someone approached him in the meantime? When he saw the Founder coming toward the field, then he could go and get the gun.

Conger looked toward the shelf. There was the neat plastic package. He took it down and unwrapped it.

He held the skull in his hands, turning it over. In spite of himself, a cold feeling rushed through him. This was the man's skull, the skull of the Founder, who was still alive, who would come here, this day, who would stand on the field not fifty yards away.

What if he could see this, his own skull, yellow and eroded? Two centuries old. Would he still speak? Would he speak, if he could see it, the grinning, aged skull? What would there be for him to say, to tell the people? What message

could he bring?

What action would not be futile, when a man could look upon his own aged, yellowed skull? Better they should enjoy their temporary lives, while they still had them to enjoy.

A man who could hold his own skull in his hands would believe in few causes, few movements. Rather, he would preach the opposite—

A sound. Conger dropped the skull back on the shelf and took up the gun. Outside something was moving. He went quickly to the door, his heart beating. Was it he? Was it the Founder, wandering by himself in the cold, looking for a place to speak? Was he meditating over his words, choosing his sentences?

What if he could see what Conger had held!

He pushed the door open, the gun raised.

Lora!

He stared at her. She was dressed in a wool jacket and boots, her hands in her pockets. A cloud of steam came from her mouth and nostrils. Her breast was rising and falling.

Silently, they looked at each other. At last Conger lowered the gun.

"What is it?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

She pointed. She did not seem able to speak. He frowned; what was wrong with her?

"What is it?" he said. "What do you want?" He looked in the direction she had pointed. "I don't see anything."

"They're coming."

"They? Who? Who are coming?"

"They are. The police. During the night the Sheriff had the state police send cars. All around, everywhere. Blocking the roads. There's about sixty of them coming. Some from town, some around behind." She stopped, gasping. "They said—they said—"

"What?"

"They said you were some kind of a Communist. They said—"

Conger went into the cage. He put the gun down on the shelf and came back out. He leaped down and went to the girl.

"Thanks. You came here to tell me? You don't believe it?"

"I don't know."

"Did you come alone?"

"No. Joe brought me in his truck. From town."

"Joe? Who's he?"

"Joe French. The plumber. He's a friend of Dad's."

"Let's go." They crossed the snow, up the ridge and onto the field. The little panel truck was parked half way across the field. A heavy short man was sitting behind the wheel, smoking his pipe. He sat up as he saw the two of them coming toward him.

"Are you the one?" he said to Conger.

"Yes. Thanks for warning me."

The plumber shrugged. "I don't know anything about this. Lora says you're all right." He turned around. "It might interest you to know some more of them are coming. Not to warn you—just curious."

"More of them?" Conger looked toward the town. Black shapes were pick-

ing their way across the snow.

"People from the town. You can't keep this sort of thing quiet, not in a small town. We all listen to the police radio; they heard the same way Lora did. Someone tuned in, spread it around—"

The shapes were getting closer. Conger could, make out a couple of them. Bill Willet was there, with some boys from the high school. The Appletons were along, hanging back in the rear.

"Even Ed Davies," Conger murmured.

The storekeeper was toiling onto the field, with three or four other men from the town.

"All curious as hell," French said. "Well, I guess I'm going back to town. I don't want my truck shot full of holes. Come on, Lora."

She was looking up at Conger, wide-eyed.

"Come on," French said again. "Let's go. You sure as hell can't stay here, you know."

"Why?"

"There may be shooting. That's what they all came to see. You know that don't you, Conger?"

"Yes."

"You have a gun? Or don't you care?" French smiled a little. "They've picked up a lot of people in their time, you know. You won't be lonely."

He cared, all right! He had to stay here, on the field. He couldn't afford to let them take him away. Any minute the Founder would appear, would step onto the field. Would he be one of the townsmen, standing silently at the foot of the field, waiting, watching?

Or maybe he was Joe French. Or maybe one of the cops. Anyone of them might find himself moved to speak. And the few words spoken this day were going to be important for a long time.

And Conger had to be there, ready when the first word was uttered!

"I care," he said. "You go on back to town. Take the girl with you."

Lora got stiffly in beside Joe French. The plumber started up the motor. "Look at them, standing there," he said. "Like vultures. Waiting to see someone get killed."

The truck drove away, Lora sitting stiff and silent, frightened now. Conger watched for a moment. Then he dashed back into the woods, between the trees, toward the ridge.

He could get away, of course. Anytime he wanted to he could get away. All he had to do was to leap into the crystal cage and turn the handles. But he had a job, an important job. He had to be here, here at this place, at this time.

He reached the cage and opened the door. He went inside and picked up the gun from the shelf. The Slem-gun would take care of them. He notched it up to full count. The chain reaction from it would flatten them all, the police, the curious, sadistic people—

They wouldn't take him! Before they got him, all of them would be dead. He would get away. He would escape. By the end of the day they would all be dead, if that was what they wanted, and he—

He saw the skull.

Suddenly he put the gun down. He picked up the skull. He turned the skull

over. He looked at the teeth. Then he went to the mirror.

He held the skull up, looking in the mirror. He pressed the skull against his cheek. Beside his own face the grinning skull leered back at him, beside his skull, against his living flesh.

He bared his teeth. And he knew.

It was his own skull that he held. He was the one who would die. He was the Founder.

After a time he put the skull down. For a few minutes he stood at the controls, playing with them idly. He could hear the sound of motors outside, the muffled noise of men. Should he go back to the present, where the Speaker waited? He could escape, of course—

Escape?

He turned toward the skull. There it was, his skull, yellow with age. Escape? Escape, when he had held it in his own hands?

What did it matter if he put it off a month, a year, ten years, even fifty? Time was nothing. He had sipped chocolate with a girl born a hundred and fifty years before his time. Escape? For a little while, perhaps.

But he could not really escape, no more so than anyone else had ever escaped, or ever would.

Only, he had held it in his hands, his own bones, his own death's-head.

They had not.

He went out the door and across the field, empty handed. There were a lot of them standing around, gathered together, waiting. They expected a good fight; they knew he had something. They had heard about the incident at the fountain.

And there were plenty of police—police with guns and tear gas, creeping across the hills and ridges, between the trees, closer and closer. It was an old story, in this century.

One of the men tossed something at him. It fell in the snow by his feet, and he looked down. It was a rock. He smiled.

"Come on!" one of them called. "Don't you have any bombs?"

"Throw a bomb! You with the beard! Throw a bomb!"

"Let 'em have it!"

"Toss a few A Bombs!"

They began to laugh. He smiled. He put his hands to his hips. They suddenly turned silent, seeing that he was going to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I don't have any bombs. You're mistaken."

There was a flurry of murmuring.

"I have a gun," he went on. "A very good one. Made by science even more advanced than your own. But I'm not going to use that, either."

They were puzzled.

"Why not?" someone called. At the edge of the group an older woman was watching. He felt a sudden shock. He had seen her before. Where?

He remembered. The day at the library. As he had turned the corner he had seen her. She had noticed him and been astounded. At the time, he did not understand why.

Conger grinned. So he would escape death, the man who right now was voluntarily accepting it. They were laughing, laughing at a man who had a gun but

didn't use it. But by a strange twist of science he would appear again, a few months later, after his bones had been buried under the floor of a jail.

And so, in a fashion, he would escape death. He would die, but then, after a period of months, he would live again, briefly, for an afternoon.

An afternoon. Yet long enough for them to see him, to understand that he was still alive. To know that somehow he had returned to life.

And then, finally, he would appear once more, after two hundred years had passed. Two centuries later.

He would be born again, born, as a matter of fact, in a small trading village on Mars. He would grow up, learning to hunt and trade—

A police car came on the edge of the field and stopped. The people retreated a little. Conger raised his hands.

"I have an odd paradox for you," he said. "Those who take lives will lose their own. Those who kill, will die. But he who gives his own life away will live again!"

They laughed, faintly, nervously. The police were coming out, walking toward him. He smiled. He had said everything he intended to say. It was a good little paradox he had coined. They would puzzle over it, remember it.

Smiling, Conger awaited a death foreordained.

THE STREET THAT WASN'T THERE

Mr. Jonathon Chambers left his house on Maple Street at exactly seven o'clock in the evening and set out on the daily walk he had taken, at the same time, come rain or snow, for twenty solid years.

The walk never varied. He paced two blocks down Maple Street, stopped at the Red Star confectionery to buy a Rose Trofero perfecto, then walked to the end of the fourth block on Maple. There he turned right on Lexington, followed Lexington to Oak, down Oak and so by way of Lincoln back to Maple again and to his home.

He didn't walk fast. He took his time. He always returned to his front door at exactly 7:45. No one ever stopped to talk with him. Even the man at the Red Star confectionery, where he bought his cigar, remained silent while the purchase was being made. Mr. Chambers merely tapped on the glass top of the counter with a coin, the man reached in and brought forth the box, and Mr. Chambers took his cigar. That was all.

For people long ago had gathered that Mr. Chambers desired to be left alone. The newer generation of townsfolk called it eccentricity. Certain uncouth persons had a different word for it. The oldsters remembered that this queer looking individual with his black silk muffler, rosewood cane and bowler hat once had been a professor at State University.

A professor of metaphysics, they

seemed to recall, or some such outlandish subject. At any rate a furore of some sort was connected with his name ... at the time an academic scandal. He had written a book, and he had taught the subject matter of that volume to his classes. What that subject matter was, had long been forgotten, but whatever it was had been considered sufficiently revolutionary to cost Mr. Chambers his post at the university.

A silver moon shone over the chimney tops and a chill, impish October wind was rustling the dead leaves when Mr. Chambers started out at seven o'clock.

It was a good night, he told himself, smelling the clean, crisp air of autumn and the faint pungence of distant wood smoke.

He walked unhurriedly, swinging his cane a bit less jauntily than twenty years ago. He tucked the muffler more securely under the rusty old topcoat and pulled his bowler hat more firmly on his head.

He noticed that the street light at the corner of Maple and Jefferson was out and he grumbled a little to himself when he was forced to step off the walk to circle a boarded-off section of newly-laid concrete work before the driveway of 816.

It seemed that he reached the corner of Lexington and Maple just a bit too quickly, but he told himself that this couldn't be. For he never did that. For twenty years, since the year following his expulsion from the university, he had lived by the clock.

The same thing, at the same time, day after day. He had not deliberately set upon such a life of routine. A bachelor, living alone with sufficient money to supply his humble needs, the timed existence had grown on him gradually.

So he turned on Lexington and back on Oak. The dog at the corner of Oak and Jefferson was waiting for him once again and came out snarling and growling, snapping at his heels. But Mr. Chambers pretended not to notice and the beast gave up the chase.

A radio was blaring down the street and faint wisps of what it was blurting floated to Mr. Chambers.

"... still taking place ... Empire State building disappeared ... thin air ... famed scientist, Dr. Edmund Harcourt...."

The wind whipped the muted words away and Mr. Chambers grumbled to himself. Another one of those fantastic radio dramas, probably. He remembered one from many years before, something about the Martians. And Harcourt! What did Harcourt have to do with it? He was one of the men who had ridiculed the book Mr. Chambers had written.

But he pushed speculation away, sniffed the clean, crisp air again, looked at the familiar things that materialized out of the late autumn darkness as he walked along. For there was nothing ... absolutely nothing in the world ... that he would let upset him. That was a tenet he had laid down twenty years ago.

There was a crowd of men in front of the drugstore at the corner of Oak and Lincoln and they were talking excitedly. Mr. Chambers caught some excited words: "It's happening everywhere.... What do you think it is.... The scientists can't explain...."

But as Mr. Chambers neared them

they fell into what seemed an abashed silence and watched him pass. He, on his part, gave them no sign of recognition. That was the way it had been for many years, ever since the people had become convinced that he did not wish to talk.

One of the men half started forward as if to speak to him, but then stepped back and Mr. Chambers continued on his walk.

Back at his own front door he stopped and as he had done a thousand times before drew forth the heavy gold watch from his pocket.

He started violently. It was only 7:30!

For long minutes he stood there staring at the watch in accusation. The timepiece hadn't stopped, for it still ticked audibly.

But 15 minutes too soon! For twenty years, day in, day out, he had started out at seven and returned at a quarter of eight. Now....

It wasn't until then that he realized something else was wrong. He had no cigar. For the first time he had neglected to purchase his evening smoke.

Shaken, muttering to himself, Mr. Chambers let himself in his house and locked the door behind him.

He hung his hat and coat on the rack in the hall and walked slowly into the living room. Dropping into his favorite chair, he shook his head in bewilderment.

Silence filled the room. A silence that was measured by the ticking of the old fashioned pendulum clock on the mantelpiece.

But silence was no strange thing to Mr. Chambers. Once he had loved music ... the kind of music he could get by tuning in symphonic orchestras on the radio. But the radio stood silent in the corner, the cord out of its socket. Mr. Chambers had pulled it out many years before. To be precise, upon the night when the symphonic broadcast had been interrupted to give a news flash.

He had stopped reading newspapers and magazines too, had exiled himself to a few city blocks. And as the years flowed by, that self exile had become a prison, an intangible, impassable wall bounded by four city blocks by three. Beyond them lay utter, unexplainable terror. Beyond them he never went.

But recluse though he was, he could not on occasion escape from hearing things. Things the newsboy shouted on the streets, things the men talked about on the drugstore corner when they didn't see him coming.

And so he knew that this was the year 1960 and that the wars in Europe and Asia had flamed to an end to be followed by a terrible plague, a plague that even now was sweeping through country after country like wild fire, decimating populations. A plague undoubtedly induced by hunger and privation and the miseries of war.

But those things he put away as items far removed from his own small world. He disregarded them. He pretended he had never heard of them. Others might discuss and worry over them if they wished. To him they simply did not matter.

But there were two things tonight that did matter. Two curious, incredible events. He had arrived home fifteen min-

utes early. He had forgotten his cigar.

Huddled in the chair, he frowned slowly. It was disquieting to have something like that happen. There must be something wrong. Had his long exile finally turned his mind ... perhaps just a very little ... enough to make him queer? Had he lost his sense of proportion, of perspective?

No, he hadn't. Take this room, for example. After twenty years it had come to be as much a part of him as the clothes he wore. Every detail of the room was engraved in his mind with ... clarity; the old center leg table with its green covering and stained glass lamp; the mantelpiece with the dusty bric-a-brac; the pendulum clock that told the time of day as well as the day of the week and month; the elephant ash tray on the tabaret and, most important of all, the marine print.

Mr. Chambers loved that picture. It had depth, he always said. It showed an old sailing ship in the foreground on a placid sea. Far in the distance, almost on the horizon line, was the vague outline of a larger vessel.

There were other pictures, too. The forest scene above the fireplace, the old English prints in the corner where he sat, the Currier and Ives above the radio. But the ship print was directly in his line of vision. He could see it without turning his head. He had put it there because he liked it best.

Further reverie became an effort as Mr. Chambers felt himself succumbing to weariness. He undressed and went to bed. For an hour he lay awake, assailed by vague fears he could neither define nor understand.

When finally he dozed off it was to lose himself in a series of horrific dreams. He dreamed first that he was a castaway on a tiny islet in mid-ocean, that the waters around the island teemed with huge poisonous sea snakes ... hydrophinnae ... and that steadily those serpents were devouring the island.

In another dream he was pursued by a horror which he could neither see nor hear, but only could imagine. And as he sought to flee he stayed in the one place. His legs worked frantically, pumping like pistons, but he could make no progress. It was as if he ran upon a treadway.

Then again the terror descended on him, a black, unimagined thing and he tried to scream and couldn't. He opened his mouth and strained his vocal cords and filled his lungs to bursting with the urge to shriek ... but not a sound came from his lips.

All next day he was uneasy and as he left the house that evening, at precisely seven o'clock, he kept saying to himself: "You must not forget tonight! You must remember to stop and get your cigar!"

The street light at the corner of Jefferson was still out and in front of 816 the cemented driveway was still boarded off. Everything was the same as the night before.

And now, he told himself, the Red Star confectionery is in the next block. I must not forget tonight. To forget twice in a row would be just too much.

He grasped that thought firmly in his mind, strode just a bit more rapidly down the street.

But at the corner he stopped in consternation. Bewildered, he stared down

the next block. There was no neon sign, no splash of friendly light upon the sidewalk to mark the little store tucked away in this residential section.

He stared at the street marker and read the word slowly: GRANT. He read it again, unbelieving, for this shouldn't be Grant Street, but Marshall. He had walked two blocks and the confectionery was between Marshall and Grant. He hadn't come to Marshall yet ... and here was Grant.

Or had he, absent-mindedly, come one block farther than he thought, passed the store as on the night before?

For the first time in twenty years, Mr. Chambers retraced his steps. He walked back to Jefferson, then turned around and went back to Grant again and on to Lexington. Then back to Grant again, where he stood astounded while a single, incredible fact grew slowly in his brain:

There wasn't any confectionery! The block from Marshall to Grant had disappeared!

Now he understood why he had missed the store on the night before, why he had arrived home fifteen minutes early.

On legs that were dead things he stumbled back to his home. He slammed and locked the door behind him and made his way unsteadily to his chair in the corner.

What was this? What did it mean? By what inconceivable necromancy could a paved street with houses, trees and buildings be spirited away and the space it had occupied be closed up?

Was something happening in the world which he, in his secluded life, knew nothing about?

Mr. Chambers shivered, reached to turn up the collar of his coat, then stopped as he realized the room must be warm. A fire blazed merrily in the grate. The cold he felt came from something ... somewhere else. The cold of fear and horror, the chill of a half whispered thought.

A deathly silence had fallen, a silence still measured by the pendulum clock. And yet a silence that held a different tenor than he had ever sensed before. Not a homey, comfortable silence ... but a silence that hinted at emptiness and nothingness.

There was something back of this, Mr. Chambers told himself. Something that reached far back into one corner of his brain and demanded recognition. Something tied up with the fragments of talk he had heard on the drugstore corner, bits of news broadcasts he had heard as he walked along the street, the shrieking of the newsboy calling his papers. Something to do with the happenings in the world from which he had excluded himself.

He brought them back to mind now and lingered over the one central theme of the talk he overheard: the wars and plagues. Hints of a Europe and Asia swept almost clean of human life, of the plague ravaging Africa, of its appearance in South America, of the frantic efforts of the United States to prevent its spread into that nation's boundaries.

Millions of people were dead in Europe and Asia, Africa and South America. Billions, perhaps.

And somehow those gruesome sta-

tistics seemed tied up with his own experience. Something, somewhere, some part of his earlier life, seemed to hold an explanation. But try as he would his befuddled brain failed to find the answer.

The pendulum clock struck slowly, its every other chime as usual setting up a sympathetic vibration in the pewter vase that stood upon the mantel.

Mr. Chambers got to his feet, strode to the door, opened it and looked out.

Moonlight tesselated the street in black and silver, etching the chimneys and trees against a silvered sky.

But the house directly across the street was not the same. It was strangely lop-sided, its dimensions out of proportion, like a house that suddenly had gone mad.

He stared at it in amazement, trying to determine what was wrong with it. He recalled how it had always stood, foursquare, a solid piece of mid-Victorian architecture.

Then, before his eyes, the house righted itself again. Slowly it drew together, ironed out its queer angles, readjusted its dimensions, became once again the stodgy house he knew it had to be.

With a sigh of relief, Mr. Chambers turned back into the hall.

But before he closed the door, he looked again. The house was lop-sided ... as bad, perhaps worse than before!

Gulping in fright, Mr. Chambers slammed the door shut, locked it and double bolted it. Then he went to his bedroom and took two sleeping powders.

His dreams that night were the same as on the night before. Again there was the islet in mid-ocean. Again he was alone upon it. Again the squirming hydrophinnae were eating his foothold piece by piece.

He awoke, body drenched with perspiration. Vague light of early dawn filtered through the window. The clock on the bedside table showed 7:30. For a long time he lay there motionless.

Again the fantastic happenings of the night before came back to haunt him and as he lay there, staring at the windows, he remembered them, one by one. But his mind, still fogged by sleep and astonishment, took the happenings in its stride, mulled over them, lost the keen edge of fantastic terror that lurked around them.

The light through the windows slowly grew brighter. Mr. Chambers slid out of bed, slowly crossed to the window, the cold of the floor biting into his bare feet. He forced himself to look out.

There was nothing outside the window. No shadows. As if there might be a fog. But no fog, however, thick, could hide the apple tree that grew close against the house.

But the tree was there ... shadowy, indistinct in the gray, with a few withered apples still clinging to its boughs, a few shriveled leaves reluctant to leave the parent branch.

The tree was there now. But it hadn't been when he first had looked. Mr. Chambers was sure of that.

And now he saw the faint outlines of his neighbor's house ... but those outlines were all wrong. They didn't jibe and fit together ... they were out of plumb. As if some giant hand had grasped the house

and wrenched it out of true. Like the house he had seen across the street the night before, the house that had painfully righted itself when he thought of how it should look.

Perhaps if he thought of how his neighbor's house should look, it too might right itself. But Mr. Chambers was very weary. Too weary to think about the house.

He turned from the window and dressed slowly. In the living room he slumped into his chair, put his feet on the old cracked ottoman. For a long time he sat, trying to think.

And then, abruptly, something like an electric shock ran through him. Rigid, he sat there, limp inside at the thought. Minutes later he arose and almost ran across the room to the old mahogany bookcase that stood against the wall.

There were many volumes in the case: his beloved classics on the first shelf, his many scientific works on the lower shelves. The second shelf contained but one book. And it was around this book that Mr. Chambers' entire life was centered.

Twenty years ago he had written it and foolishly attempted to teach its philosophy to a class of undergraduates. The newspapers, he remembered, had made a great deal of it at the time. Tongues had been set to wagging. Narrow-minded townsfolk, failing to understand either his philosophy or his aim, but seeing in him another exponent of some anti-rational cult, had forced his expulsion from the school.

It was a simple book, really, dismissed by most authorities as merely the vagaries of an over-zealous mind.

Mr. Chambers took it down now, opened its cover and began thumbing slowly through the pages. For a moment the memory of happier days swept over him.

Then his eyes focused on the paragraph, a paragraph written so long ago the very words seemed strange and unreal:

Man himself, by the power of mass suggestion, holds the physical fate of this earth ... yes, even the universe. Billions of minds seeing trees as trees, houses as houses, streets as streets ... and not as something else. Minds that see things as they are and have kept things as they were.... Destroy those minds and the entire foundation of matter, robbed of its regenerative power, will crumple and slip away like a column of sand....

His eyes followed down the page:

Yet this would have nothing to do with matter itself ... but only with matter's form. For while the mind of man through long ages may have moulded an imagery of that space in which he lives, mind would have little conceivable influence upon the existence of that matter. What exists in our known universe shall exist always and can never be destroyed, only altered or transformed.

But in modern astrophysics and mathematics we gain an insight into the possibility ... yes probability ... that there are other dimensions, other brackets of time and space impinging on the one we occupy.

If a pin is thrust into a shadow, would that shadow have any knowledge of the pin? It would not, for in this case the

shadow is two dimensional, the pin three dimensional. Yet both occupy the same space.

Granting then that the power of men's minds alone holds this universe, or at least this world in its present form, may we not go farther and envision other minds in some other plane watching us, waiting, waiting craftily for the time they can take over the domination of matter? Such a concept is not impossible. It is a natural conclusion if we accept the double hypothesis: that mind does control the formation of all matter; and that other worlds lie in juxtaposition with ours.

Perhaps we shall come upon a day, far distant, when our plane, our world will dissolve beneath our feet and before our eyes as some stronger intelligence reaches out from the dimensional shadows of the very space we live in and wrests from us the matter which we know to be our own.

He stood astounded beside the bookcase, his eyes staring unseeing into the fire upon the hearth.

He had written that. And because of those words he had been called a heretic, had been compelled to resign his position at the university, had been forced into this hermit life.

A tumultuous idea hammered at him. Men had died by the millions all over the world. Where there had been thousands of minds there now were one or two. A feeble force to hold the form of matter intact.

The plague had swept Europe and Asia almost clean of life, had blighted Africa, had reached South America ... might even have come to the United States. He remembered the whispers he had heard, the words of the men at the drugstore corner, the buildings disappearing. Something scientists could not explain. But those were merely scraps of information. He did not know the whole story ... he could not know. He never listened to the radio, never read a newspaper.

But abruptly the whole thing fitted together in his brain like the missing piece of a puzzle into its slot. The significance of it all gripped him with damning clarity.

There were not sufficient minds in existence to retain the material world in its mundane form. Some other power from another dimension was fighting to supersede man's control and take his universe into its own plane!

Abruptly Mr. Chambers closed the book, shoved it back in the case and picked up his hat and coat.

He had to know more. He had to find someone who could tell him.

He moved through the hall to the door, emerged into the street. On the walk he looked skyward, trying to make out the sun. But there wasn't any sun ... only an all pervading grayness that shrouded everything ... not a gray fog, but a gray emptiness that seemed devoid of life, of any movement.

The walk led to his gate and there it ended, but as he moved forward the sidewalk came into view and the house ahead loomed out of the gray, but a house with differences.

He moved forward rapidly. Visibility extended only a few feet and as he ap-

proached them the houses materialized like two dimensional pictures without perspective, like twisted cardboard soldiers lining up for review on a misty morning.

Once he stopped and looked back and saw that the grayness had closed in behind him. The houses were wiped out, the sidewalk faded into nothing.

He shouted, hoping to attract attention. But his voice frightened him. It seemed to ricochet up and into the higher levels of the sky, as if a giant door had been opened to a mighty room high above him.

He went on until he came to the corner of Lexington. There, on the curb, he stopped and stared. The gray wall was thicker there but he did not realize how close it was until he glanced down at his feet and saw there was nothing, nothing at all beyond the curbstone. No dull gleam of wet asphalt, no sign of a street. It was as if all eternity ended here at the corner of Maple and Lexington.

With a wild cry, Mr. Chambers turned and ran. Back down the street he raced, coat streaming after him in the wind, bowler hat bouncing on his head.

Panting, he reached the gate and stumbled up the walk, thankful that it still was there.

On the stoop he stood for a moment, breathing hard. He glanced back over his shoulder and a queer feeling of inner numbness seemed to well over him. At that moment the gray nothingness appeared to thin ... the enveloping curtain fell away, and he saw....

Vague and indistinct, yet cast in stereoscopic outline, a gigantic city was lined against the darkling sky. It was a city fantastic with cubed domes, spires, and aerial bridges and flying buttresses. Tunnel-like streets, flanked on either side by shining metallic ramps and runways, stretched endlessly to the vanishing point. Great shafts of multicolored light probed huge streamers and ellipses above the higher levels.

And beyond, like a final backdrop, rose a titanic wall. It was from that wall ... from its crenelated parapets and battlements that Mr. Chambers felt the eyes peering at him.

Thousands of eyes glaring down with but a single purpose.

And as he continued to look, something else seemed to take form above that wall. A design this time, that swirled and writhed in the ribbons of radiance and rapidly coalesced into strange geometric features, without definite line or detail. A colossal face, a face of indescribable power and evil, it was, staring down with malevolent composure.

Then the city and the face slid out of focus; the vision faded like a darkened magic-lantern, and the grayness moved in again.

Mr. Chambers pushed open the door of his house. But he did not lock it. There was no need of locks ... not any more.

A few coals of fire still smouldered in the grate and going there, he stirred them up, raked away the ash, piled on more wood. The flames leaped merrily, dancing in the chimney's throat.

Without removing his hat and coat, he sank exhausted in his favorite chair, closed his eyes then opened them again.

He sighed with relief as he saw the

room was unchanged. Everything in its accustomed place: the clock, the lamp, the elephant ash tray, the marine print on the wall.

Everything was as it should be. The clock measured the silence with its measured ticking; it chimed abruptly and the vase sent up its usual sympathetic vibration.

This was his room, he thought. Rooms acquire the personality of the person who lives in them, become a part of him. This was his world, his own private world, and as such it would be the last to go.

But how long could he ... his brain ... maintain its existence?

Mr. Chambers stared at the marine print and for a moment a little breath of reassurance returned to him. They couldn't take this away. The rest of the world might dissolve because there was insufficient power of thought to retain its outward form.

But this room was his. He alone had furnished it. He alone, since he had first planned the house's building, had lived here.

This room would stay. It must stay on ... it must....

He rose from his chair and walked across the room to the book case, stood staring at the second shelf with its single volume. His eyes shifted to the top shelf and swift terror gripped him.

For all the books weren't there. A lot of books weren't there! Only the most beloved, the most familiar ones.

So the change already had started here! The unfamiliar books were gone and that fitted in the pattern ... for it would be the least familiar things that would go first.

Wheeling, he stared across the room. Was it his imagination, or did the lamp on the table blur and begin to fade away?

But as he stared at it, it became clear again, a solid, substantial thing.

For a moment real fear reached out and touched him with chilly fingers. For he knew that this room no longer was proof against the thing that had happened out there on the street.

Or had it really happened? Might not all this exist within his own mind? Might not the street be as it always was, with laughing children and barking dogs? Might not the Red Star confectionery still exist, splashing the street with the red of its neon sign?

Could it be that he was going mad? He had heard whispers when he had passed, whispers the gossiping housewives had not intended him to hear. And he had heard the shouting of boys when he walked by. They thought him mad. Could he be really mad?

But he knew he wasn't mad. He knew that he perhaps was the sanest of all men who walked the earth. For he, and he alone, had foreseen this very thing. And the others had scoffed at him for it.

Somewhere else the children might be playing on a street. But it would be a different street. And the children undoubtedly would be different too.

For the matter of which the street and everything upon it had been formed would now be cast in a different mold, stolen by different minds in a different dimension.

Perhaps we shall come upon a day, far distant, when our plane, our world will

dissolve beneath our feet and before our eyes as some stronger intelligence reaches out from the dimensional shadows of the very space we live in and wrests from us the matter which we know to be our own.

But there had been no need to wait for that distant day. Scant years after he had written those prophetic words the thing was happening. Man had played unwittingly into the hands of those other minds in the other dimension. Man had waged a war and war had bred a pestilence. And the whole vast cycle of events was but a detail of a cyclopean plan.

He could see it all now. By an insidious mass hypnosis minions from that other dimension ... or was it one supreme intelligence ... had deliberately sown the seeds of dissension. The reduction of the world's mental power had been carefully planned with diabolic premeditation.

On impulse he suddenly turned, crossed the room and opened the connecting door to the bedroom. He stopped on the threshold and a sob forced its way to his lips.

There was no bedroom. Where his stolid four poster and dresser had been there was greyish nothingness.

Like an automaton he turned again and paced to the hall door. Here, too, he found what he had expected. There was no hall, no familiar hat rack and umbrella stand.

Nothing....

Weakly Mr. Chambers moved back to his chair in the corner.

"So here I am," he said, half aloud.

So there he was. Embattled in the last corner of the world that was left to him.

Perhaps there were other men like him, he thought. Men who stood at bay against the emptiness that marked the transition from one dimension to another. Men who had lived close to the things they loved, who had endowed those things with such substantial form by power of mind alone that they now stood out alone against the power of some greater mind.

The street was gone. The rest of his house was gone. This room still retained its form.

This room, he knew, would stay the longest. And when the rest of the room was gone, this corner with his favorite chair would remain. For this was the spot where he had lived for twenty years. The bedroom was for sleeping, the kitchen for eating. This room was for living. This was his last stand.

These were the walls and floors and prints and lamps that had soaked up his will to make them walls and prints and lamps.

He looked out the window into a blank world. His neighbors' houses already were gone. They had not lived with them as he had lived with this room. Their interests had been divided, thinly spread; their thoughts had not been concentrated as his upon an area four blocks by three, or a room fourteen by twelve.

Staring through the window, he saw it again. The same vision he had looked upon before and yet different in an indescribable way. There was the city illumined in the sky. There were the elliptical towers and turrets, the cube-shaped domes and battlements. He could see with stereoscopic clarity the aerial

bridges, the gleaming avenues sweeping on into infinitude. The vision was nearer this time, but the depth and proportion had changed ... as if he were viewing it from two concentric angles at the same time.

And the face ... the face of magnitude ... of power of cosmic craft and evil....

Mr. Chambers turned his eyes back into the room. The clock was ticking slowly, steadily. The greyness was stealing into the room.

The table and radio were the first to go. They simply faded away and with them went one corner of the room.

And then the elephant ash tray.

"Oh, well," said Mr. Chambers, "I never did like that very well."

Now as he sat there it didn't seem queer to be without the table or the radio. It was as if it were something quite normal. Something one could expect to happen.

Perhaps, if he thought hard enough, he could bring them back.

But, after all, what was the use? One man, alone, could not stand off the irresistible march of nothingness. One man, all alone, simply couldn't do it.

He wondered what the elephant ash tray looked like in that other dimension. It certainly wouldn't be an elephant ash tray nor would the radio be a radio, for perhaps they didn't have ash trays or radios or elephants in the invading dimension.

He wondered, as a matter of fact, what he himself would look like when he finally slipped into the unknown. For he was matter, too, just as the ash tray and radio were matter.

He wondered if he would retain his individuality ... if he still would be a person. Or would he merely be a thing?

There was one answer to all of that. He simply didn't know.

Nothingness advanced upon him, ate its way across the room, stalking him as he sat in the chair underneath the lamp. And he waited for it.

The room, or what was left of it, plunged into dreadful silence.

Mr. Chambers started. The clock had stopped. Funny ... the first time in twenty years.

He leaped from his chair and then sat down again.

The clock hadn't stopped.

It wasn't there.

There was a tingling sensation in his feet.

THE VARIABLE MAN

He fixed things—clocks, refrigerators, vidsenders and destinies. But he had no business in the future, where the calculators could not handle him. He was Earth's only hope—and its sure failure!

Security Commissioner Reinhart rapidly climbed the front steps and entered the Council building. Council guards stepped quickly aside and he entered the familiar place of great whirring machines. His thin face rapt, eyes alight with emotion, Reinhart gazed intently up at the central SRB computer, studying its

reading.

"Straight gain for the last quarter," observed Kaplan, the lab organizer. He grinned proudly, as if personally responsible. "Not bad, Commissioner."

"We're catching up to them," Reinhart retorted. "But too damn slowly. We must finally go over—and soon."

Kaplan was in a talkative mood. "We design new offensive weapons, they counter with improved defenses. And nothing is actually made! Continual improvement, but neither we nor Centaurus can stop designing long enough to stabilize for production."

"It will end," Reinhart stated coldly, "as soon as Terra turns out a weapon for which Centaurus can build no defense."

"Every weapon has a defense. Design and discord. Immediate obsolescence. Nothing lasts long enough to—"

"What we count on is the lag," Reinhart broke in, annoyed. His hard gray eyes bored into the lab organizer and Kaplan slunk back. "The time lag between our offensive design and their counter development. The lag varies." He waved impatiently toward the massed banks of SRB machines. "As you well know."

At this moment, 9:30 AM, May 7, 2136, the statistical ratio on the SRB machines stood at 21-17 on the Centauran side of the ledger. All facts considered, the odds favored a successful repulsion by Proxima Centaurus of a Terran military attack. The ratio was based on the total information known to the SRB machines, on a gestalt of the vast flow of data that poured in endlessly from all sectors of the Sol and Centaurus systems.

21-17 on the Centauran side. But a month ago it had been 24-18 in the enemy's favor. Things were improving, slowly but steadily. Centaurus, older and less virile than Terra, was unable to match Terra's rate of technocratic advance. Terra was pulling ahead.

"If we went to war now," Reinhart said thoughtfully, "we would lose. We're not far enough along to risk an overt attack." A harsh, ruthless glow twisted across his handsome features, distorting them into a stern mask. "But the odds are moving in our favor. Our offensive designs are gradually gaining on their defenses."

"Let's hope the war comes soon," Kaplan agreed. "We're all on edge. This damn waiting...."

The war would come soon. Reinhart knew it intuitively. The air was full of tension, the elan. He left the SRB rooms and hurried down the corridor to his own elaborately guarded office in the Security wing. It wouldn't be long. He could practically feel the hot breath of destiny on his neck—for him a pleasant feeling. His thin lips set in a humorless smile, showing an even line of white teeth against his tanned skin. It made him feel good, all right. He'd been working at it a long time.

First contact, a hundred years earlier, had ignited instant conflict between Proxima Centauran outposts and exploring Terran raiders. Flash fights, sudden eruptions of fire and energy beams.

And then the long, dreary years of inaction between enemies where contact required years of travel, even at nearly the speed of light. The two systems were

evenly matched. Screen against screen. Warship against power station. The Centauran Empire surrounded Terra, an iron ring that couldn't be broken, rusty and corroded as it was. Radical new weapons had to be conceived, if Terra was to break out.

Through the windows of his office, Reinhart could see endless buildings and streets, Terrans hurrying back and forth. Bright specks that were commute ships, little eggs that carried businessmen and white-collar workers around. The huge transport tubes that shot masses of workmen to factories and labor camps from their housing units. All these people, waiting to break out. Waiting for the day.

Reinhart snapped on his vidscreen, the confidential channel. "Give me Military Designs," he ordered sharply.

He sat tense, his wiry body taut, as the vidscreen warmed into life. Abruptly he was facing the hulking image of Peter Sherikov, director of the vast network of labs under the Ural Mountains.

Sherikov's great bearded features hardened as he recognized Reinhart. His bushy black eyebrows pulled up in a sullen line. "What do you want? You know I'm busy. We have too much work to do, as it is. Without being bothered by—politicians."

"I'm dropping over your way," Reinhart answered lazily. He adjusted the cuff of his immaculate gray cloak. "I want a full description of your work and whatever progress you've made."

"You'll find a regular departmental report plate filed in the usual way, around your office someplace. If you'll refer to that you'll know exactly what we—"

"I'm not interested in that. I want to see what you're doing. And I expect you to be prepared to describe your work fully. I'll be there shortly. Half an hour."

Reinhart cut the circuit. Sherikov's heavy features dwindled and faded. Reinhart relaxed, letting his breath out. Too bad he had to work with Sherikov. He had never liked the man. The big Polish scientist was an individualist, refusing to integrate himself with society. Independent, atomistic in outlook. He held concepts of the individual as an end, diametrically contrary to the accepted organic state Weltansicht.

But Sherikov was the leading research scientist, in charge of the Military Designs Department. And on Designs the whole future of Terra depended. Victory over Centaurus—or more waiting, bottled up in the Sol System, surrounded by a rotting, hostile Empire, now sinking into ruin and decay, yet still strong.

Reinhart got quickly to his feet and left the office. He hurried down the hall and out of the Council building.

A few minutes later he was heading across the mid-morning sky in his highspeed cruiser, toward the Asiatic land-mass, the vast Ural mountain range. Toward the Military Designs labs.

Sherikov met him at the entrance. "Look here, Reinhart. Don't think you're going to order me around. I'm not going to—"

"Take it easy." Reinhart fell into step beside the bigger man. They passed through the check and into the auxiliary labs. "No immediate coercion will be exerted over you or your staff. You're free to continue your work as you see

fit—for the present. Let's get this straight. My concern is to integrate your work with our total social needs. As long as your work is sufficiently productive..."

Reinhart stopped in his tracks.

"Pretty, isn't he?" Sherikov said ironically.

"What the hell is it?

"Icarus, we call him. Remember the Greek myth? The legend of Icarus. Icarus flew.... This Icarus is going to fly, one of these days." Sherikov shrugged. "You can examine him, if you want. I suppose this is what you came here to see."

Reinhart advanced slowly. "This is the weapon you've been working on?"

"How does he look?"

Rising up in the center of the chamber was a squat metal cylinder, a great ugly cone of dark gray. Technicians circled around it, wiring up the exposed relay banks. Reinhart caught a glimpse of endless tubes and filaments, a maze of wires and terminals and parts crisscrossing each other, layer on layer.

"What is it?" Reinhart perched on the edge of a workbench, leaning his big shoulders against the wall. "An idea of Jamison Hedge—the same man who developed our instantaneous interstellar vidcasts forty years ago. He was trying to find a method of faster than light travel when he was killed, destroyed along with most of his work. After that ftl research was abandoned. It looked as if there were no future in it."

"Wasn't it shown that nothing could travel faster than light?"

"The interstellar vidcasts do! No, Hedge developed a valid ftl drive. He managed to propel an object at fifty times the speed of light. But as the object gained speed, its length began to diminish and its mass increased. This was in line with familiar twentieth-century concepts of mass-energy transformation. We conjectured that as Hedge's object gained velocity it would continue to lose length and gain mass until its length became nil and its mass infinite. Nobody can imagine such an object."

"Go on."

"But what actually occurred is this. Hedge's object continued to lose length and gain mass until it reached the theoretical limit of velocity, the speed of light. At that point the object, still gaining speed, simply ceased to exist. Having no length, it ceased to occupy space. It disappeared. However, the object had not been destroyed. It continued on its way, gaining momentum each moment, moving in an arc across the galaxy, away from the Sol system. Hedge's object entered some other realm of being, beyond our powers of conception. The next phase of Hedge's experiment consisted in a search for some way to slow the ftl object down, back to a sub-ftl speed, hence back into our universe. This counterprinciple was eventually worked out."

"With what result?"

"The death of Hedge and destruction of most of his equipment. His experimental object, in re-entering the space-time universe, came into being in space already occupied by matter. Possessing an incredible mass, just below infinity level, Hedge's object exploded in a titanic cataclysm. It was obvious that no space travel was possible with such a drive. Virtually all space contains some matter. To re-

enter space would bring automatic destruction. Hedge had found his ftl drive and his counterprinciple, but no one before this has been able to put them to any use."

Reinhart walked over toward the great metal cylinder. Sherikov jumped down and followed him. "I don't get it," Reinhart said. "You said the principle is no good for space travel."

"That's right."

"What's this for, then? If the ship explodes as soon as it returns to our universe—"

"This is not a ship." Sherikov grinned slyly. "Icarus is the first practical application of Hedge's principles. Icarus is a bomb."

"So this is our weapon," Reinhart said. "A bomb. An immense bomb."

"A bomb, moving at a velocity greater than light. A bomb which will not exist in our universe. The Centaurans won't be able to detect or stop it. How could they? As soon as it passes the speed of light it will cease to exist—beyond all detection."

"But—"

"Icarus will be launched outside the lab, on the surface. He will align himself with Proxima Centaurus, gaining speed rapidly. By the time he reaches his destination he will be traveling at ftl-100. Icarus will be brought back to this universe within Centaurus itself. The explosion should destroy the star and wash away most of its planets—including their central hub-planet, Armun. There is no way they can halt Icarus, once he has been launched. No defense is possible. Nothing can stop him. It is a real fact."

"When will he be ready?"

Sherikov's eyes flickered. "Soon."

"Exactly how soon?"

The big Pole hesitated. "As a matter of fact, there's only one thing holding us back."

Sherikov led Reinhart around to the other side of the lab. He pushed a lab guard out of the way.

"See this?" He tapped a round globe, open at one end, the size of a grapefruit. "This is holding us up."

"What is it?"

"The central control turret. This thing brings Icarus back to sub-ftl flight at the correct moment. It must be absolutely accurate. Icarus will be within the star only a matter of a microsecond. If the turret does not function exactly, Icarus will pass out the other side and shoot beyond the Centauran system."

"How near completed is this turret?"

Sherikov hedged uncertainly, spreading out his big hands. "Who can say? It must be wired with infinitely minute equipment—microscope grapples and wires invisible to the naked eye."

"Can you name any completion date?"

Sherikov reached into his coat and brought out a manila folder. "I've drawn up the data for the SRB machines, giving a date of completion. You can go ahead and feed it. I entered ten days as the maximum period. The machines can work from that."

Reinhart accepted the folder cautiously. "You're sure about the date? I'm not convinced I can trust you, Sherikov."

Sherikov's features darkened. "You'll have to take a chance, Commissioner. I don't trust you any more than you trust me. I know how much you'd like an excuse to get me out of here and one of your puppets in."

Reinhart studied the huge scientist thoughtfully. Sherikov was going to be a hard nut to crack. Designs was responsible to Security, not the Council. Sherikov was losing ground—but he was still a potential danger. Stubborn, individualistic, refusing to subordinate his welfare to the general good.

"All right." Reinhart put the folder slowly away in his coat. "I'll feed it. But you better be able to come through. There can't be any slip-ups. Too much hangs on the next few days."

"If the odds change in our favor are you going to give the mobilization order?"

"Yes," Reinhart stated. "I'll give the order the moment I see the odds change."

Standing in front of the machines, Reinhart waited nervously for the results. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The day was warm, a pleasant May afternoon. Outside the building the daily life of the planet went on as usual.

As usual? Not exactly. The feeling was in the air, an expanding excitement growing every day. Terra had waited a long time. The attack on Proxima Centaurus had to come—and the sooner the better. The ancient Centauran Empire hemmed in Terra, bottled the human race up in its one system. A vast, suffocating net draped across the heavens, cutting Terra off from the bright diamonds beyond.... And it had to end.

The SRB machines whirred, the visible combination disappearing. For a time no ratio showed. Reinhart tensed, his body rigid. He waited.

The new ratio appeared.

Reinhart gasped. 7-6. Toward Terra!

Within five minutes the emergency mobilization alert had been flashed to all Government departments. The Council and President Duffe had been called to immediate session. Everything was happening fast.

But there was no doubt. 7-6. In Terra's favor. Reinhart hurried frantically to get his papers in order, in time for the Council session.

At histo-research the message plate was quickly pulled from the confidential slot and rushed across the central lab to the chief official.

"Look at this!" Fredman dropped the plate on his superior's desk. "Look at it!"

Harper picked up the plate, scanning it rapidly. "Sounds like the real thing. I didn't think we'd live to see it."

Fredman left the room, hurrying down the hall. He entered the time bubble office. "Where's the bubble?" he demanded, looking around.

One of the technicians looked slowly up. "Back about two hundred years. We're coming up with interesting data on the War of 1914. According to material the bubble has already brought up—"

"Cut it. We're through with routine work. Get the bubble back to the present. From now on all equipment has to be free for Military work."

"But—the bubble is regulated auto-

matically."

"You can bring it back manually."

"It's risky." The technician hedged. "If the emergency requires it, I suppose we could take a chance and cut the automatic."

"The emergency requires everything," Fredman said feelingly.

"But the odds might change back," Margaret Duffe, President of the Council, said nervously. "Any minute they can revert."

"This is our chance!" Reinhart snapped, his temper rising. "What the hell's the matter with you? We've waited years for this."

The Council buzzed with excitement. Margaret Duffe hesitated uncertainly, her blue eyes clouded with worry. "I realize the opportunity is here. At least, statistically. But the new odds have just appeared. How do we know they'll last? They stand on the basis of a single weapon."

"You're wrong. You don't grasp the situation." Reinhart held himself in check with great effort. "Sherikov's weapon tipped the ratio in our favor. But the odds have been moving in our direction for months. It was only a question of time. The new balance was inevitable, sooner or later. It's not just Sherikov. He's only one factor in this. It's all nine planets of the Sol System—not a single man."

One of the Councilmen stood up. "The President must be aware the entire planet is eager to end this waiting. All our activities for the past eighty years have been directed toward—"

Reinhart moved close to the slender President of the Council. "If you don't approve the war, there probably will be mass rioting. Public reaction will be strong. Damn strong. And you know it."

Margaret Duffe shot him a cold glance. "You sent out the emergency order to force my hand. You were fully aware of what you were doing. You knew once the order was out there'd be no stopping things."

A murmur rushed through the Council, gaining volume. "We have to approve the war!... We're committed!... It's too late to turn back!"

Shouts, angry voices, insistent waves of sound lapped around Margaret Duffe. "I'm as much for the war as anybody," she said sharply. "I'm only urging moderation. An inter-system war is a big thing. We're going to war because a machine says we have a statistical chance of winning."

"There's no use starting the war unless we can win it," Reinhart said. "The SRB machines tell us whether we can win."

"They tell us our chance of winning. They don't guarantee anything."

"What more can we ask, beside a good chance of winning?"

Margaret Duffe clamped her jaw together tightly. "All right. I hear all the clamor. I won't stand in the way of Council approval. The vote can go ahead." Her cold, alert eyes appraised Reinhart. "Especially since the emergency order has already been sent out to all Government departments."

"Good." Reinhart stepped away with relief. "Then it's settled. We can finally go ahead with full mobilization."

Mobilization proceeded rapidly. The

next forty-eight hours were alive with activity.

Reinhart attended a policy-level Military briefing in the Council rooms, conducted by Fleet Commander Carleton.

"You can see our strategy," Carleton said. He traced a diagram on the blackboard with a wave of his hand. "Sherikov states it'll take eight more days to complete the ftl bomb. During that time the fleet we have near the Centauran system will take up positions. As the bomb goes off the fleet will begin operations against the remaining Centauran ships. Many will no doubt survive the blast, but with Armun gone we should be able to handle them."

Reinhart took Commander Carleton's place. "I can report on the economic situation. Every factory on Terra is converted to arms production. With Armun out of the way we should be able to promote mass insurrection among the Centauran colonies. An intersystem Empire is hard to maintain, even with ships that approach light speed. Local war-lords should pop up all over the place. We want to have weapons available for them and ships starting now to reach them in time. Eventually we hope to provide a unifying principle around which the colonies can all collect. Our interest is more economic than political. They can have any kind of government they want, as long as they act as supply areas for us. As our eight system planets act now."

Carleton resumed his report. "Once the Centauran fleet has been scattered we can begin the crucial stage of the war. The landing of men and supplies from the ships we have waiting in all key areas throughout the Centauran system. In this stage—"

Reinhart moved away. It was hard to believe only two days had passed since the mobilization order had been sent out. The whole system was alive, functioning with feverish activity. Countless problems were being solved—but much remained.

He entered the lift and ascended to the SRB room, curious to see if there had been any change in the machines' reading. He found it the same. So far so good. Did the Centaurans know about Icarus? No doubt; but there wasn't anything they could do about it. At least, not in eight days.

Kaplan came over to Reinhart, sorting a new batch of data that had come in. The lab organizer searched through his data. "An amusing item came in. It might interest you." He handed a message plate to Reinhart.

It was from histo-research:

May 9, 2136

This is to report that in bringing the research time bubble up to the present the manual return was used for the first time. Therefore a clean break was not made, and a quantity of material from the past was brought forward. This material included an individual from the early twentieth century who escaped from the lab immediately. He has not yet been taken into protective custody. Histo-research regrets this incident, but attributes it to the emergency.

E. Fredman

Reinhart handed the plate back to Kaplan. "Interesting. A man from the past—hauled into the middle of the big-

gest war the universe has seen."

"Strange things happen. I wonder what the machines will think."

"Hard to say. Probably nothing." Reinhart left the room and hurried along the corridor to his own office.

As soon as he was inside he called Sherikov on the vidscreen, using the confidential line.

The Pole's heavy features appeared. "Good day, Commissioner. How's the war effort?"

"Fine. How's the turret wiring proceeding?"

A faint frown flickered across Sherikov's face. "As a matter of fact, Commissioner—"

"What's the matter?" Reinhart said sharply.

Sherikov floundered. "You know how these things are. I've taken my crew off it and tried robot workers. They have greater dexterity, but they can't make decisions. This calls for more than mere dexterity. This calls for—" He searched for the word. "—for an artist."

Reinhart's face hardened. "Listen, Sherikov. You have eight days left to complete the bomb. The data given to the SRB machines contained that information. The 7-6 ratio is based on that estimate. If you don't come through—"

Sherikov twisted in embarrassment. "Don't get excited, Commissioner. We'll complete it."

"I hope so. Call me as soon as it's done." Reinhart snapped off the connection. If Sherikov let them down he'd have him taken out and shot. The whole war depended on the ftl bomb.

The vidscreen glowed again. Reinhart snapped it on. Kaplan's face formed on it. The lab organizer's face was pale and frozen. "Commissioner, you better come up to the SRB office. Something's happened."

"What is it?"

"I'll show you."

Alarmed, Reinhart hurried out of his office and down the corridor. He found Kaplan standing in front of the SRB machines. "What's the story?" Reinhart demanded. He glanced down at the reading. It was unchanged.

Kaplan held up a message plate nervously. "A moment ago I fed this into the machines. After I saw the results I quickly removed it. It's that item I showed you. From histo-research. About the man from the past."

"What happened when you fed it?"

Kaplan swallowed unhappily. "I'll show you. I'll do it again. Exactly as before." He fed the plate into a moving intake belt. "Watch the visible figures," Kaplan muttered.

Reinhart watched, tense and rigid. For a moment nothing happened. 7-6 continued to show. Then—

The figures disappeared. The machines faltered. New figures showed briefly. 4-24 for Centaurus. Reinhart gasped, suddenly sick with apprehension. But the figures vanished. New figures appeared. 16-38 for Centaurus. Then 48-86. 79-15 in Terra's favor. Then nothing. The machines whirred, but nothing happened.

Nothing at all. No figures. Only a blank.

"What's it mean?" Reinhart muttered,

dazed.

"It's fantastic. We didn't think this could—"

"What's happened?"

"The machines aren't able to handle the item. No reading can come. It's data they can't integrate. They can't use it for prediction material, and it throws off all their other figures."

"Why?"

"It's—it's a variable." Kaplan was shaking, white-lipped and pale. "Something from which no inference can be made. The man from the past. The machines can't deal with him. The variable man!"

2

Thomas Cole was sharpening a knife with his whetstone when the tornado hit.

The knife belonged to the lady in the big green house. Every time Cole came by with his Fixit cart the lady had something to be sharpened. Once in awhile she gave him a cup of coffee, hot black coffee from an old bent pot. He liked that fine; he enjoyed good coffee.

The day was drizzly and overcast. Business had been bad. An automobile had scared his two horses. On bad days less people were outside and he had to get down from the cart and go to ring doorbells.

But the man in the yellow house had given him a dollar for fixing his electric refrigerator. Nobody else had been able to fix it, not even the factory man. The dollar would go a long way. A dollar was a lot.

He knew it was a tornado even before it hit him. Everything was silent. He was bent over his whetstone, the reins between his knees, absorbed in his work.

He had done a good job on the knife; he was almost finished. He spat on the blade and was holding it up to see—and then the tornado came.

All at once it was there, completely around him. Nothing but grayness. He and the cart and horses seemed to be in a calm spot in the center of the tornado. They were moving in a great silence, gray mist everywhere.

And while he was wondering what to do, and how to get the lady's knife back to her, all at once there was a bump and the tornado tipped him over, sprawled out on the ground. The horses screamed in fear, struggling to pick themselves up. Cole got quickly to his feet.

Where was he?

The grayness was gone. White walls stuck up on all sides. A deep light gleamed down, not daylight but something like it. The team was pulling the cart on its side, dragging it along, tools and equipment falling out. Cole righted the cart, leaping up onto the seat.

And for the first time saw the people.

Men, with astonished white faces, in some sort of uniforms. Shouts, noise and confusion. And a feeling of danger!

Cole headed the team toward the door. Hoofs thundered steel against steel as they pounded through the doorway, scattering the astonished men in all directions. He was out in a wide hall. A building, like a hospital.

The hall divided. More men were coming, spilling from all sides.

Shouting and milling in excitement, like white ants. Something cut past him, a beam of dark violet. It seared off a corner of the cart, leaving the wood smoking.

Cole felt fear. He kicked at the terrified horses. They reached a big door, crashing wildly against it. The door gave—and they were outside, bright sunlight blinking down on them. For a sickening second the cart tilted, almost turning over. Then the horses gained speed, racing across an open field, toward a distant line of green, Cole holding tightly to the reins.

Behind him the little white-faced men had come out and were standing in a group, gesturing frantically. He could hear their faint shrill shouts.

But he had got away. He was safe. He slowed the horses down and began to breathe again.

The woods were artificial. Some kind of park. But the park was wild and overgrown. A dense jungle of twisted plants. Everything growing in confusion.

The park was empty. No one was there. By the position of the sun he could tell it was either early morning or late afternoon. The smell of the flowers and grass, the dampness of the leaves, indicated morning. It had been late afternoon when the tornado had picked him up. And the sky had been overcast and cloudy.

Cole considered. Clearly, he had been carried a long way. The hospital, the men with white faces, the odd lighting, the accented words he had caught—everything indicated he was no longer in Nebraska—maybe not even in the United States.

Some of his tools had fallen out and gotten lost along the way. Cole collected everything that remained, sorting them, running his fingers over each tool with affection. Some of the little chisels and wood gouges were gone. The bit box had opened, and most of the smaller bits had been lost. He gathered up those that remained and replaced them tenderly in the box. He took a key-hole saw down, and with an oil rag wiped it carefully and replaced it.

Above the cart the sun rose slowly in the sky. Cole peered up, his horny hand over his eyes. A big man, stoop-shouldered, his chin gray and stubbled. His clothes wrinkled and dirty. But his eyes were clear, a pale blue, and his hands were finely made.

He could not stay in the park. They had seen him ride that way; they would be looking for him.

Far above something shot rapidly across the sky. A tiny black dot moving with incredible haste. A second dot followed. The two dots were gone almost before he saw them. They were utterly silent.

Cole frowned, perturbed. The dots made him uneasy. He would have to keep moving—and looking for food. His stomach was already beginning to rumble and groan.

Work. There was plenty he could do: gardening, sharpening, grinding, repair work on machines and clocks, fixing all kinds of household things. Even painting and odd jobs and carpentry and chores.

He could do anything. Anything people wanted done. For a meal and

pocket money.

Thomas Cole urged the team into life, moving forward. He sat hunched over in the seat, watching intently, as the Fixit cart rolled slowly across the tangled grass, through the jungle of trees and flowers.

Reinhart hurried, racing his cruiser at top speed, followed by a second ship, a military escort. The ground sped by below him, a blur of gray and green.

The remains of New York lay spread out, a twisted, blunted ruin overgrown with weeds and grass. The great atomic wars of the twentieth century had turned virtually the whole seaboard area into an endless waste of slag.

Slag and weeds below him. And then the sudden tangle that had been Central Park.

Histo-research came into sight. Reinhart swooped down, bringing his cruiser to rest at the small supply field behind the main buildings.

Harper, the chief official of the department, came quickly over as soon as Reinhart's ship landed.

"Frankly, we don't understand why you consider this matter important," Harper said uneasily.

Reinhart shot him a cold glance. "I'll be the judge of what's important. Are you the one who gave the order to bring the bubble back manually?"

"Fredman gave the actual order. In line with your directive to have all facilities ready for—"

Reinhart headed toward the entrance of the research building. "Where is Fredman?"

"Inside."

"I want to see him. Let's go."

Fredman met them inside. He greeted Reinhart calmly, showing no emotion. "Sorry to cause you trouble, Commissioner. We were trying to get the station in order for the war. We wanted the bubble back as quickly as possible." He eyed Reinhart curiously. "No doubt the man and his cart will soon be picked up by your police."

"I want to know everything that happened, in exact detail."

Fredman shifted uncomfortably. "There's not much to tell. I gave the order to have the automatic setting canceled and the bubble brought back manually. At the moment the signal reached it, the bubble was passing through the spring of 1913. As it broke loose, it tore off a piece of ground on which this person and his cart were located. The person naturally was brought up to the present, inside the bubble."

"Didn't any of your instruments tell you the bubble was loaded?"

"We were too excited to take any readings. Half an hour after the manual control was thrown, the bubble materialized in the observation room. It was deenergized before anyone noticed what was inside. We tried to stop him but he drove the cart out into the hall, bowling us out of the way. The horses were in a panic."

"What kind of cart was it?"

"There was some kind of sign on it. Painted in black letters on both sides. No one saw what it was."

"Go ahead. What happened then?"

"Somebody fired a Slem-ray after him, but it missed. The horses carried

him out of the building and onto the grounds. By the time we reached the exit the cart was half way to the park."

Reinhart reflected. "If he's still in the park we should have him shortly. But we must be careful." He was already starting back toward his ship, leaving Fredman behind. Harper fell in beside him.

Reinhart halted by his ship. He beckoned some Government guards over. "Put the executive staff of this department under arrest. I'll have them tried on a treason count, later on." He smiled ironically as Harper's face blanched sickly pale. "There's a war going on. You'll be lucky if you get off alive."

Reinhart entered his ship and left the surface, rising rapidly into the sky. A second ship followed after him, a military escort. Reinhart flew high above the sea of gray slag, the unrecovered waste area. He passed over a sudden square of green set in the ocean of gray. Reinhart gazed back at it until it was gone.

Central Park. He could see police ships racing through the sky, ships and transports loaded with troops, heading toward the square of green. On the ground some heavy guns and surface cars rumbled along, lines of black approaching the park from all sides.

They would have the man soon. But meanwhile, the SRB machines were blank. And on the SRB machines' readings the whole war depended.

About noon the cart reached the edge of the park. Cole rested for a moment, allowing the horses time to crop at the thick grass. The silent expanse of slag amazed him. What had happened? Nothing stirred. No buildings, no sign of life. Grass and weeds poked up occasionally through it, breaking the flat surface here and there, but even so, the sight gave him an uneasy chill.

Cole drove the cart slowly out onto the slag, studying the sky above him. There was nothing to hide him, now that he was out of the park. The slag was bare and uniform, like the ocean. If he were spotted—

A horde of tiny black dots raced across the sky, coming rapidly closer. Presently they veered to the right and disappeared. More planes, wingless metal planes. He watched them go, driving slowly on.

Half an hour later something appeared ahead. Cole slowed the cart down, peering to see. The slag came to an end. He had reached its limits. Ground appeared, dark soil and grass. Weeds grew everywhere. Ahead of him, beyond the end of the slag, was a line of buildings, houses of some sort. Or sheds.

Houses, probably. But not like any he had ever seen.

The houses were uniform, all exactly the same. Like little green shells, rows of them, several hundred. There was a little lawn in front of each. Lawn, a path, a front porch, bushes in a meager row around each house. But the houses were all alike and very small.

Little green shells in precise, even rows. He urged the cart cautiously forward, toward the houses.

No one seemed to be around. He entered a street between two rows of houses, the hoofs of his two horses sounding loudly in the silence. He was in some

kind of town. But there were no dogs or children. Everything was neat and silent. Like a model. An exhibit. It made him uncomfortable.

A young man walking along the pavement gaped at him in wonder. An oddly-dressed youth, in a toga-like cloak that hung down to his knees. A single piece of fabric. And sandals.

Or what looked like sandals. Both the cloak and the sandals were of some strange half-luminous material. It glowed faintly in the sunlight. Metallic, rather than cloth.

A woman was watering flowers at the edge of a lawn. She straightened up as his team of horses came near. Her eyes widened in astonishment—and then fear. Her mouth fell open in a soundless O and her sprinkling can slipped from her fingers and rolled silently onto the lawn.

Cole blushed and turned his head quickly away. The woman was scarcely dressed! He flicked the reins and urged the horses to hurry.

Behind him, the woman still stood. He stole a brief, hasty look back—and then shouted hoarsely to his team, ears scarlet. He had seen right. She wore only a pair of translucent shorts. Nothing else. A mere fragment of the same half-luminous material that glowed and sparkled. The rest of her small body was utterly naked.

He slowed the team down. She had been pretty. Brown hair and eyes, deep red lips. Quite a good figure. Slender waist, downy legs, bare and supple, full breasts—. He clamped the thought furiously off. He had to get to work. Business.

Cole halted the Fixit cart and leaped down onto the pavement. He selected a house at random and approached it cautiously. The house was attractive. It had a certain simple beauty. But it looked frail—and exactly like the others.

He stepped up on the porch. There was no bell. He searched for it, running his hand uneasily over the surface of the door. All at once there was a click, a sharp snap on a level with his eyes. Cole glanced up, startled. A lens was vanishing as the door section slid over it. He had been photographed.

While he was wondering what it meant, the door swung suddenly open. A man filled up the entrance, a big man in a tan uniform, blocking the way ominously.

"What do you want?" the man demanded.

"I'm looking for work," Cole murmured. "Any kind of work. I can do anything, fix any kind of thing. I repair broken objects. Things that need mending." His voice trailed off uncertainly. "Anything at all."

"Apply to the Placement Department of the Federal Activities Control Board," the man said crisply. "You know all occupational therapy is handled through them." He eyed Cole curiously. "Why have you got on those ancient clothes?"

"Ancient? Why, I—"

The man gazed past him at the Fixit cart and the two dozing horses. "What's that? What are those two animals? Horses?" The man rubbed his jaw, studying Cole intently. "That's strange," he said.

"Strange?" Cole murmured uneasily. "Why?"

"There haven't been any horses for over a century. All the horses were wiped out during the Fifth Atomic War. That's why it's strange."

Cole tensed, suddenly alert. There was something in the man's eyes, a hardness, a piercing look. Cole moved back off the porch, onto the path. He had to be careful. Something was wrong.

"I'll be going," he murmured.

"There haven't been any horses for over a hundred years." The man came toward Cole. "Who are you? Why are you dressed up like that? Where did you get that vehicle and pair of horses?"

"I'll be going," Cole repeated, moving away.

The man whipped something from his belt, a thin metal tube. He stuck it toward Cole.

It was a rolled-up paper, a thin sheet of metal in the form of a tube. Words, some kind of script. He could not make any of them out. The man's picture, rows of numbers, figures—

"I'm Director Winslow," the man said. "Federal Stockpile Conservation. You better talk fast, or there'll be a Security car here in five minutes."

Cole moved—fast. He raced, head down, back along the path to the cart, toward the street.

Something hit him. A wall of force, throwing him down on his face. He sprawled in a heap, numb and dazed. His body ached, vibrating wildly, out of control. Waves of shock rolled over him, gradually diminishing.

He got shakily to his feet. His head spun. He was weak, shattered, trembling violently. The man was coming down the walk after him. Cole pulled himself onto the cart, gasping and retching. The horses jumped into life. Cole rolled over against the seat, sick with the motion of the swaying cart.

He caught hold of the reins and managed to drag himself up in a sitting position. The cart gained speed, turning a corner. Houses flew past. Cole urged the team weakly, drawing great shuddering breaths. Houses and streets, a blur of motion, as the cart flew faster and faster along.

Then he was leaving the town, leaving the neat little houses behind. He was on some sort of highway. Big buildings, factories, on both sides of the highway. Figures, men watching in astonishment.

After awhile the factories fell behind. Cole slowed the team down. What had the man meant? Fifth Atomic War. Horses destroyed. It didn't make sense. And they had things he knew nothing about. Force fields. Planes without wings—soundless.

Cole reached around in his pockets. He found the identification tube the man had handed him. In the excitement he had carried it off. He unrolled the tube slowly and began to study it. The writing was strange to him.

For a long time he studied the tube. Then, gradually, he became aware of something. Something in the top right-hand corner.

A date. October 6, 2128.

Cole's vision blurred. Everything spun and wavered around him. October, 2128. Could it be?

But he held the paper in his hand. Thin, metal paper. Like foil. And it had to

be. It said so, right in the corner, printed on the paper itself.

Cole rolled the tube up slowly, numbed with shock. Two hundred years. It didn't seem possible. But things were beginning to make sense. He was in the future, two hundred years in the future.

While he was mulling this over, the swift black Security ship appeared overhead, diving rapidly toward the horse-drawn cart, as it moved slowly along the road.

Reinhart's vidscreen buzzed. He snapped it quickly on. "Yes?"

"Report from Security."

"Put it through." Reinhart waited tensely as the lines locked in place. The screen re-lit.

"This is Dixon. Western Regional Command." The officer cleared his throat, shuffling his message plates. "The man from the past has been reported, moving away from the New York area."

"Which side of your net?"

"Outside. He evaded the net around Central Park by entering one of the small towns at the rim of the slag area."

"Evaded?"

"We assumed he would avoid the towns. Naturally the net failed to encompass any of the towns."

Reinhart's jaw stiffened. "Go on."

"He entered the town of Petersville a few minutes before the net closed around the park. We burned the park level, but naturally found nothing. He had already gone. An hour later we received a report from a resident in Petersville, an official of the Stockpile Conservation Department. The man from the past had come to his door, looking for work. Winslow, the official, engaged him in conversation, trying to hold onto him, but he escaped, driving his cart off. Winslow called Security right away, but by then it was too late."

"Report to me as soon as anything more comes in. We must have him—and damn soon." Reinhart snapped the screen off. It died quickly.

He sat back in his chair, waiting.

Cole saw the shadow of the Security ship. He reacted at once. A second after the shadow passed over him, Cole was out of the cart, running and falling. He rolled, twisting and turning, pulling his body as far away from the cart as possible.

There was a blinding roar and flash of white light. A hot wind rolled over Cole, picking him up and tossing him like a leaf. He shut his eyes, letting his body relax. He bounced, falling and striking the ground. Gravel and stones tore into his face, his knees, the palms of his hands.

Cole cried out, shrieking in pain. His body was on fire. He was being consumed, incinerated by the blinding white orb of fire. The orb expanded, growing in size, swelling like some monstrous sun, twisted and bloated. The end had come. There was no hope. He gritted his teeth—

The greedy orb faded, dying down. It sputtered and winked out, blackening into ash. The air reeked, a bitter acrid smell. His clothes were burning and smoking. The ground under him was hot, baked dry, seared by the blast. But he was alive. At least, for awhile.

Cole opened his eyes slowly. The cart was gone. A great hole gaped where it had been, a shattered sore in the center of the highway. An ugly cloud hung above the hole, black and ominous. Far above, the wingless plane circled, watching for any signs of life.

Cole lay, breathing shallowly, slowly. Time passed. The sun moved across the sky with agonizing slowness. It was perhaps four in the afternoon. Cole calculated mentally. In three hours it would be dark. If he could stay alive until then—

Had the plane seen him leap from the cart?

He lay without moving. The late afternoon sun beat down on him. He felt sick, nauseated and feverish. His mouth was dry.

Some ants ran over his outstretched hand. Gradually, the immense black cloud was beginning to drift away, dispersing into a formless blob.

The cart was gone. The thought lashed against him, pounding at his brain, mixing with his labored pulsebeat. Gone. Destroyed. Nothing but ashes and debris remained. The realization dazed him.

Finally the plane finished its circling, winging its way toward the horizon. At last it vanished. The sky was clear.

Cole got unsteadily to his feet. He wiped his face shakily. His body ached and trembled. He spat a couple times, trying to clear his mouth. The plane would probably send in a report. People would be coming to look for him. Where could he go?

To his right a line of hills rose up, a distant green mass. Maybe he could reach them. He began to walk slowly. He had to be very careful. They were looking for him—and they had weapons. Incredible weapons.

He would be lucky to still be alive when the sun set. His team and Fixit cart were gone—and all his tools. Cole reached into his pockets, searching through them hopefully. He brought out some small screwdrivers, a little pair of cutting pliers, some wire, some solder, the whetstone, and finally the lady's knife.

Only a few small tools remained. He had lost everything else. But without the cart he was safer, harder to spot. They would have more trouble finding him, on foot.

Cole hurried along, crossing the level fields toward the distant range of hills.

The call came through to Reinhart almost at once. Dixon's features formed on the vidscreen. "I have a further report, Commissioner." Dixon scanned the plate. "Good news. The man from the past was sighted moving away from Petersville, along highway 13, at about ten miles an hour, on his horse-drawn cart. Our ship bombed him immediately."

"Did—did you get him?"

"The pilot reports no sign of life after the blast."

Reinhart's pulse almost stopped. He sank back in his chair. "Then he's dead!"

"Actually, we won't know for certain until we can examine the debris. A surface car is speeding toward the spot. We should have the complete report in a short time. We'll notify you as soon as the

information comes in."

Reinhart reached out and cut the screen. It faded into darkness. Had they got the man from the past? Or had he escaped again? Weren't they ever going to get him? Couldn't he be captured? And meanwhile, the SRB machines were silent, showing nothing at all.

Reinhart sat brooding, waiting impatiently for the report of the surface car to come in.

It was evening.

"Come on!" Steven shouted, running frantically after his brother. "Come on back!"

"Catch me." Earl ran and ran, down the side of the hill, over behind a military storage depot, along a neotex fence, jumping finally down into Mrs. Norris' back yard.

Steven hurried after his brother, sobbing for breath, shouting and gasping as he ran. "Come back! You come back with that!"

"What's he got?" Sally Tate demanded, stepping out suddenly to block Steven's way.

Steven halted, his chest rising and falling. "He's got my intersystem vidsender." His small face twisted with rage and misery. "He better give it back!"

Earl came circling around from the right. In the warm gloom of evening he was almost invisible. "Here I am," he announced. "What you going to do?"

Steven glared at him hotly. His eyes made out the square box in Earl's hands. "You give that back! Or—or I'll tell Dad."

Earl laughed. "Make me."

"Dad'll make you."

"You better give it to him," Sally said.

"Catch me." Earl started off. Steven pushed Sally out of the way, lashing wildly at his brother. He collided with him, throwing him sprawling. The box fell from Earl's hands. It skidded to the pavement, crashing into the side of a guide-light post.

Earl and Steven picked themselves up slowly. They gazed down at the broken box.

"See?" Steven shrilled, tears filling his eyes. "See what you did?"

"You did it. You pushed into me."

"You did it!"' Steven bent down and picked up the box. He carried it over to the guide-light, sitting down on the curb to examine it.

Earl came slowly over. "If you hadn't pushed me it wouldn't have got broken."

Night was descending rapidly. The line of hills rising above the town were already lost in darkness. A few lights had come on here and there. The evening was warm. A surface car slammed its doors, some place off in the distance. In the sky ships droned back and forth, weary commuters coming home from work in the big underground factory units.

Thomas Cole came slowly toward the three children grouped around the guide-light. He moved with difficulty, his body sore and bent with fatigue. Night had come, but he was not safe yet.

He was tired, exhausted and hungry. He had walked a long way. And he had to have something to eat—soon.

A few feet from the children Cole stopped. They were all intent and ab-

sorbed by the box on Steven's knees. Suddenly a hush fell over the children. Earl looked up slowly.

In the dim light the big stooped figure of Thomas Cole seemed extra menacing. His long arms hung down loosely at his sides. His face was lost in shadow. His body was shapeless, indistinct. A big unformed statue, standing silently a few feet away, unmoving in the half-darkness.

"Who are you?" Earl demanded, his voice low.

"What do you want?" Sally said. The children edged away nervously. "Get away."

Cole came toward them. He bent down a little. The beam from the guidelight crossed his features. Lean, prominent nose, beak-like, faded blue eyes—

Steven scrambled to his feet, clutching the vidsender box. "You get out of here!"

"Wait." Cole smiled crookedly at them. His voice was dry and raspy. "What do you have there?" He pointed with his long, slender fingers. "The box you're holding."

The children were silent. Finally Steven stirred. "It's my inter-system vidsender."

"Only it doesn't work," Sally said.

"Earl broke it." Steven glared at his brother bitterly. "Earl threw it down and broke it."

Cole smiled a little. He sank down wearily on the edge of the curb, sighing with relief. He had been walking too long. His body ached with fatigue. He was hungry, and tired. For a long time he sat, wiping perspiration from his neck and face, too exhausted to speak.

"Who are you?" Sally demanded, at last. "Why do you have on those funny clothes? Where did you come from?"

"Where?" Cole looked around at the children. "From a long way off. A long way." He shook his head slowly from side to side, trying to clear it.

"What's your therapy?" Earl said.

"My therapy?"

"What do you do? Where do you work?"

Cole took a deep breath and let it out again slowly. "I fix things. All kinds of things. Any kind."

Earl sneered. "Nobody fixes things. When they break you throw them away."

Cole didn't hear him. Sudden need had roused him, getting him suddenly to his feet. "You know any work I can find?" he demanded. "Things I could do? I can fix anything. Clocks, type-writers, refrigerators, pots and pans. Leaks in the roof. I can fix anything there is."

Steven held out his inter-system vidsender. "Fix this."

There was silence. Slowly, Cole's eyes focussed on the box. "That?"

"My sender. Earl broke it."

Cole took the box slowly. He turned it over, holding it up to the light. He frowned, concentrating on it. His long, slender fingers moved carefully over the surface, exploring it.

"He'll steal it!" Earl said suddenly.

"No." Cole shook his head vaguely. "I'm reliable." His sensitive fingers found the studs that held the box together. He depressed the studs, pushing them expertly in. The box opened, revealing its

complex interior.

"He got it open," Sally whispered.

"Give it back!" Steven demanded, a little frightened. He held out his hand. "I want it back."

The three children watched Cole apprehensively. Cole fumbled in his pocket. Slowly he brought out his tiny screwdrivers and pliers. He laid them in a row beside him. He made no move to return the box.

"I want it back," Steven said feebly.

Cole looked up. His faded blue eyes took in the sight of the three children standing before him in the gloom. "I'll fix it for you. You said you wanted it fixed."

"I want it back." Steven stood on one foot, then the other, torn by doubt and indecision. "Can you really fix it? Can you make it work again?"

"Yes."

"All right. Fix it for me, then."

A sly smile flickered across Cole's tired face. "Now, wait a minute. If I fix it, will you bring me something to eat? I'm not fixing it for nothing."

"Something to eat?"

"Food. I need hot food. Maybe some coffee."

Steven nodded. "Yes. I'll get it for you."

Cole relaxed. "Fine. That's fine." He turned his attention back to the box resting between his knees. "Then I'll fix it for you. I'll fix it for you good."

His fingers flew, working and twisting, tracing down wires and relays, exploring and examining. Finding out about the inter-system vidsender. Discovering how it worked.

Steven slipped into the house through the emergency door. He made his way to the kitchen with great care, walking on tip-toe. He punched the kitchen controls at random, his heart beating excitedly. The stove began to whirr, purring into life. Meter readings came on, crossing toward the completion marks.

Presently the stove opened, sliding out a tray of steaming dishes. The mechanism clicked off, dying into silence. Steven grabbed up the contents of the tray, filling his arms. He carried everything down the hall, out the emergency door and into the yard. The yard was dark. Steven felt his way carefully along.

He managed to reach the guide-light without dropping anything at all.

Thomas Cole got slowly to his feet as Steven came into view. "Here," Steven said. He dumped the food onto the curb, gasping for breath. "Here's the food. Is it finished?"

Cole held out the inter-system vidsender. "It's finished. It was pretty badly smashed."

Earl and Sally gazed up, wide-eyed. "Does it work?" Sally asked.

"Of course not," Earl stated. "How could it work? He couldn't—"

"Turn it on!" Sally nudged Steven eagerly. "See if it works."

Steven was holding the box under the light, examining the switches. He clicked the main switch on. The indicator light gleamed. "It lights up," Steven said.

"Say something into it."

Steven spoke into the box. "Hello! Hello! This is operator 6-Z75 calling. Can

you hear me? This is operator 6-Z75. Can you hear me?"

In the darkness, away from the beam of the guide-light, Thomas Cole sat crouched over the food. He ate gratefully, silently. It was good food, well cooked and seasoned. He drank a container of orange juice and then a sweet drink he didn't recognize. Most of the food was strange to him, but he didn't care. He had walked a long way and he was plenty hungry. And he still had a long way to go, before morning. He had to be deep in the hills before the sun came up. Instinct told him that he would be safe among the trees and tangled growth—at least, as safe as he could hope for.

He ate rapidly intent on the food. He did not look up until he was finished. Then he got slowly to his feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

The three children were standing around in a circle, operating the intersystem vidsender. He watched them for a few minutes. None of them looked up from the small box. They were intent, absorbed in what they were doing.

"Well?" Cole said, at last. "Does it work all right?"

After a moment Steven looked up at him. There was a strange expression on his face. He nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, it works. It works fine."

Cole grunted. "All right." He turned and moved away from the light. "That's fine."

The children watched silently until the figure of Thomas Cole had completely disappeared. Slowly, they turned and looked at each other. Then down at the box in Steven's hands. They gazed at the box in growing awe. Awe mixed with dawning fear.

Steven turned and edged toward his house. "I've got to show it to my Dad," he murmured, dazed. "He's got to know. Somebody's got to know!"

3

Eric Reinhart examined the vidsender box carefully, turning it around and around.

"Then he did escape from the blast," Dixon admitted reluctantly. "He must have leaped from the cart just before the concussion."

Reinhart nodded. "He escaped. He got away from you—twice." He pushed the vidsender box away and leaned abruptly toward the man standing uneasily in front of his desk. "What's your name again?"

"Elliot. Richard Elliot."

"And your son's name?"

"Steven."

"It was last night this happened?"

"About eight o'clock."

"Go on."

"Steven came into the house. He acted queerly. He was carrying his intersystem vidsender." Elliot pointed at the box on Reinhart's desk. "That. He was nervous and excited. I asked what was wrong. For awhile he couldn't tell me. He was quite upset. Then he showed me the vidsender." Elliot took a deep, shaky breath. "I could see right away it was different. You see I'm an electrical engineer. I had opened it once before, to put in a new battery. I had a fairly good idea how it should look." Elliot hesitated. "Com-

missioner, it had been changed. A lot of the wiring was different. Moved around. Relays connected differently. Some parts were missing. New parts had been jury rigged out of old. Then I discovered the thing that made me call Security. The vidsender—it really worked."

"Worked?"

"You see, it never was anything more than a toy. With a range of a few city blocks. So the kids could call back and forth from their rooms. Like a sort of portable vidscreen. Commissioner, I tried out the vidsender, pushing the call button and speaking into the microphone. I—I got a ship of the line. A battleship, operating beyond Proxima Centaurus—over eight light years away. As far out as the actual vidsenders operate. Then I called Security. Right away."

For a time Reinhart was silent. Finally he tapped the box lying on the desk. "You got a ship of the line—with this?"

"That's right."

"How big are the regular vidsenders?"

Dixon supplied the information. "As big as a twenty-ton safe."

"That's what I thought." Reinhart waved his hand impatiently. "All right, Elliot. Thanks for turning the information over to us. That's all."

Security police led Elliot outside the office.

Reinhart and Dixon looked at each other. "This is bad," Reinhart said harshly. "He has some ability, some kind of mechanical ability. Genius, perhaps, to do a thing like this. Look at the period he came from, Dixon. The early part of the twentieth century. Before the wars began. That was a unique period. There was a certain vitality, a certain ability. It was a period of incredible growth and discovery. Edison. Pasteur. Burbank. The Wright brothers. Inventions and machines. People had an uncanny ability with machines. A kind of intuition about machines—which we don't have."

"You mean—"

"I mean a person like this coming into our own time is bad in itself, war or no war. He's too different. He's oriented along different lines. He has abilities we lack. This fixing skill of his. It throws us off, out of kilter. And with the war....

"Now I'm beginning to understand why the SRB machines couldn't factor him. It's impossible for us to understand this kind of person. Winslow says he asked for work, any kind of work. The man said he could do anything, fix anything. Do you understand what that means?"

"No," Dixon said. "What does it mean?"

"Can any of us fix anything? No. None of us can do that. We're specialized. Each of us has his own line, his own work. I understand my work, you understand yours. The tendency in evolution is toward greater and greater specialization. Man's society is an ecology that forces adaptation to it. Continual complexity makes it impossible for any of us to know anything outside our own personal field—I can't follow the work of the man sitting at the next desk over from me. Too much knowledge has piled up in each field. And there's too many fields.

"This man is different. He can fix anything, do anything. He doesn't work with

knowledge, with science—the classified accumulation of facts. He knows nothing. It's not in his head, a form of learning. He works by intuition—his power is in his hands, not his head. Jack-of-all-trades. His hands! Like a painter, an artist. In his hands—and he cuts across our lives like a knife-blade."

"And the other problem?"

"The other problem is that this man, this variable man, has escaped into the Albertine Mountain range. Now we'll have one hell of a time finding him. He's clever—in a strange kind of way. Like some sort of animal. He's going to be hard to catch."

Reinhart sent Dixon out. After a moment he gathered up the handful of reports on his desk and carried them up to the SRB room. The SRB room was closed up, sealed off by a ring of armed Security police. Standing angrily before the ring of police was Peter Sherikov, his beard waggling angrily, his immense hands on his hips.

"What's going on?" Sherikov demanded. "Why can't I go in and peep at the odds?"

"Sorry." Reinhart cleared the police aside. "Come inside with me. I'll explain." The doors opened for them and they entered. Behind them the doors shut and the ring of police formed outside. "What brings you away from your lab?" Reinhart asked.

Sherikov shrugged. "Several things. I wanted to see you. I called you on the vidphone and they said you weren't available. I thought maybe something had happened. What's up?"

"I'll tell you in a few minutes." Reinhart called Kaplan over. "Here are some new items. Feed them in right away. I want to see if the machines can total them."

"Certainly, Commissioner." Kaplan took the message plates and placed them on an intake belt. The machines hummed into life.

"We'll know soon," Reinhart said, half aloud.

Sherikov shot him a keen glance. "We'll know what? Let me in on it. What's taking place?"

"We're in trouble. For twenty-four hours the machines haven't given any reading at all. Nothing but a blank. A total blank."

Sherikov's features registered disbelief. "But that isn't possible. Some odds exist at all times."

"The odds exist, but the machines aren't able to calculate them."

"Why not?"

"Because a variable factor has been introduced. A factor which the machines can't handle. They can't make any predictions from it."

"Can't they reject it?" Sherikov said slyly. "Can't they just—just ignore it?"

"No. It exists, as real data. Therefore it affects the balance of the material, the sum total of all other available data. To reject it would be to give a false reading. The machines can't reject any data that's known to be true."

Sherikov pulled moodily at his black beard. "I would be interested in knowing what sort of factor the machines can't handle. I thought they could take in all data pertaining to contemporary reality."

"They can. This factor has nothing to do with contemporary reality. That's the trouble. Histo-research in bringing its time bubble back from the past got overzealous and cut the circuit too quickly. The bubble came back loaded—with a man from the twentieth century. A man from the past."

"I see. A man from two centuries ago." The big Pole frowned. "And with a radically different Weltanschauung. No connection with our present society. Not integrated along our lines at all. Therefore the SRB machines are perplexed."

Reinhart grinned. "Perplexed? I suppose so. In any case, they can't do anything with the data about this man. The variable man. No statistics at all have been thrown up—no predictions have been made. And it knocks everything else out of phase. We're dependent on the constant showing of these odds. The whole war effort is geared around them."

"The horse-shoe nail. Remember the old poem? 'For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of the shoe the horse was lost. For want of the horse the rider was lost. For want—'"

"Exactly. A single factor coming along like this, one single individual, can throw everything off. It doesn't seem possible that one person could knock an entire society out of balance—but apparently it is."

"What are you doing about this man?"

"The Security police are organized in a mass search for him."

"Results?"

"He escaped into the Albertine Mountain Range last night. It'll be hard to find him. We must expect him to be loose for another forty-eight hours. It'll take that long for us to arrange the annihilation of the range area. Perhaps a trifle longer. And meanwhile—"

"Ready, Commissioner," Kaplan interrupted. "The new totals."

The SRB machines had finished factoring the new data. Reinhart and Sherikov hurried to take their places before the view windows.

For a moment nothing happened. Then odds were put up, locking in place.

Sherikov gasped. 99-2. In favor of Terra. "That's wonderful! Now we—"

The odds vanished. New odds took their places. 97-4. In favor of Centaurus. Sherikov groaned in astonished dismay. "Wait," Reinhart said to him. "I don't think they'll last."

The odds vanished. A rapid series of odds shot across the screen, a violent stream of numbers, changing almost instantly. At last the machines became silent.

Nothing showed. No odds. No totals at all. The view windows were blank.

"You see?" Reinhart murmured. "The same damn thing!"

Sherikov pondered. "Reinhart, you're too Anglo-Saxon, too impulsive. Be more Slavic. This man will be captured and destroyed within two days. You said so yourself. Meanwhile, we're all working night and day on the war effort. The warfleet is waiting near Proxima, taking up positions for the attack on the Centaurans. All our war plants are going full blast. By the time the attack date comes we'll have a full-sized invasion army ready to take off for the long trip to

the Centauran colonies. The whole Terran population has been mobilized. The eight supply planets are pouring in material. All this is going on day and night, even without odds showing. Long before the attack comes this man will certainly be dead, and the machines will be able to show odds again."

Reinhart considered. "But it worries me, a man like that out in the open. Loose. A man who can't be predicted. It goes against science. We've been making statistical reports on society for two centuries. We have immense files of data. The machines are able to predict what each person and group will do at a given time, in a given situation. But this man is beyond all prediction. He's a variable. It's contrary to science."

"The indeterminate particle."

"What's that?"

"The particle that moves in such a way that we can't predict what position it will occupy at a given second. Random. The random particle."

"Exactly. It's—it's unnatural."

Sherikov laughed sarcastically. "Don't worry about it, Commissioner. The man will be captured and things will return to their natural state. You'll be able to predict people again, like laboratory rats in a maze. By the way—why is this room guarded?"

"I don't want anyone to know the machines show no totals. It's dangerous to the war effort."

"Margaret Duffe, for example?"

Reinhart nodded reluctantly. "They're too timid, these parliamentarians. If they discover we have no SRB odds they'll want to shut down the war planning and go back to waiting."

"Too slow for you, Commissioner? Laws, debates, council meetings, discussions.... Saves a lot of time if one man has all the power. One man to tell people what to do, think for them, lead them around."

Reinhart eyed the big Pole critically. "That reminds me. How is Icarus coming? Have you continued to make progress on the control turret?"

A scowl crossed Sherikov's broad features. "The control turret?" He waved his big hand vaguely. "I would say it's coming along all right. We'll catch up in time."

Instantly Reinhart became alert. "Catch up? You mean you're still behind?"

"Somewhat. A little. But we'll catch up." Sherikov retreated toward the door. "Let's go down to the cafeteria and have a cup of coffee. You worry too much, Commissioner. Take things more in your stride."

"I suppose you're right." The two men walked out into the hall. "I'm on edge. This variable man. I can't get him out of my mind."

"Has he done anything yet?"

"Nothing important. Rewired a child's toy. A toy vidsender."

"Oh?" Sherikov showed interest. "What do you mean? What did he do?"

"I'll show you." Reinhart led Sherikov down the hall to his office. They entered and Reinhart locked the door. He handed Sherikov the toy and roughed in what Cole had done. A strange look crossed Sherikov's face. He found the studs on the box and depressed them. The box

opened. The big Pole sat down at the desk and began to study the interior of the box. "You're sure it was the man from the past who rewired this?"

"Of course. On the spot. The boy damaged it playing. The variable man came along and the boy asked him to fix it. He fixed it, all right."

"Incredible." Sherikov's eyes were only an inch from the wiring. "Such tiny relays. How could he—"

"What?"

"Nothing." Sherikov got abruptly to his feet, closing the box carefully. "Can I take this along? To my lab? I'd like to analyze it more fully."

"Of course. But why?"

"No special reason. Let's go get our coffee." Sherikov headed toward the door. "You say you expect to capture this man in a day or so?"

"Kill him, not capture him. We've got to eliminate him as a piece of data. We're assembling the attack formations right now. No slip-ups, this time. We're in the process of setting up a cross-bombing pattern to level the entire Albertine range. He must be destroyed, within the next forty-eight hours."

Sherikov nodded absently. "Of course," he murmured. A preoccupied expression still remained on his broad features. "I understand perfectly."

Thomas Cole crouched over the fire he had built, warming his hands. It was almost morning. The sky was turning violet gray. The mountain air was crisp and chill. Cole shivered and pulled himself closer to the fire.

The heat felt good against his hands. His hands. He gazed down at them, glowing yellow-red in the firelight. The nails were black and chipped. Warts and endless calluses on each finger, and the palms. But they were good hands; the fingers were long and tapered. He respected them, although in some ways he didn't understand them.

Cole was deep in thought, meditating over his situation. He had been in the mountains two nights and a day. The first night had been the worst. Stumbling and falling, making his way uncertainly up the steep slopes, through the tangled brush and undergrowth—

But when the sun came up he was safe, deep in the mountains, between two great peaks. And by the time the sun had set again he had fixed himself up a shelter and a means of making a fire. Now he had a neat little box trap, operated by a plaited grass rope and pit, a notched stake. One rabbit already hung by his hind legs and the trap was waiting for another.

The sky turned from violet gray to a deep cold gray, a metallic color. The mountains were silent and empty. Far off some place a bird sang, its voice echoing across the vast slopes and ravines. Other birds began to sing. Off to his right something crashed through the brush, an animal pushing its way along.

Day was coming. His second day. Cole got to his feet and began to unfasten the rabbit. Time to eat. And then? After that he had no plans. He knew instinctively that he could keep himself alive indefinitely with the tools he had retained, and the genius of his hands. He could kill game and skin it. Eventually he could build himself a permanent shelter, even make clothes but of hides. In winter—

But he was not thinking that far ahead. Cole stood by the fire, staring up at the sky, his hands on his hips. He squinted, suddenly tense. Something was moving. Something in the sky, drifting slowly through the grayness. A black dot.

He stamped out the fire quickly. What was it? He strained, trying to see. A bird?

A second dot joined the first. Two dots. Then three. Four. Five. A fleet of them, moving rapidly across the early morning sky. Toward the mountains.

Toward him.

Cole hurried away from the fire. He snatched up the rabbit and carried it along with him, into the tangled shelter he had built. He was invisible, inside the shelter. No one could find him. But if they had seen the fire—

He crouched in the shelter, watching the dots grow larger. They were planes, all right. Black wingless planes, coming closer each moment. Now he could hear them, a faint dull buzz, increasing until the ground shook under him.

The first plane dived. It dropped like a stone, swelling into a great black shape. Cole gasped, sinking down. The plane roared in an arc, swooping low over the ground. Suddenly bundles tumbled out, white bundles falling and scattering like seeds.

The bundles drifted rapidly to the ground. They landed. They were men. Men in uniform.

Now the second plane was diving. It roared overhead, releasing its load. More bundles tumbled out, filling the sky. The third plane dived, then the fourth. The air was thick with drifting bundles of white, a blanket of descending weed spores, settling to earth.

On the ground the soldiers were forming into groups. Their shouts carried to Cole, crouched in his shelter. Fear leaped through him. They were landing on all sides of him. He was cut off. The last two planes had dropped men behind him.

He got to his feet, pushing out of the shelter. Some of the soldiers had found the fire, the ashes and coals. One dropped down, feeling the coals with his hand. He waved to the others. They were circling all around, shouting and gesturing. One of them began to set up some kind of gun. Others were unrolling coils of tubing, locking a collection of strange pipes and machinery in place.

Cole ran. He rolled down a slope, sliding and falling. At the bottom he leaped to his feet and plunged into the brush. Vines and leaves tore at his face, slashing and cutting him. He fell again, tangled in a mass of twisted shrubbery. He fought desperately, trying to free himself. If he could reach the knife in his pocket—

Voices. Footsteps. Men were behind him, running down the slope. Cole struggled frantically, gasping and twisting, trying to pull loose. He strained, breaking the vines, clawing at them with his hands.

A soldier dropped to his knee, leveling his gun. More soldiers arrived, bringing up their rifles and aiming.

Cole cried out. He closed his eyes, his body suddenly limp. He waited, his teeth locked together, sweat dripping down his neck, into his shirt, sagging against the mesh of vines and branches

coiled around him.

Silence.

Cole opened his eyes slowly. The soldiers had regrouped. A huge man was striding down the slope toward them, barking orders as he came.

Two soldiers stepped into the brush. One of them grabbed Cole by the shoulder.

"Don't let go of him." The huge man came over, his black beard jutting out. "Hold on."

Cole gasped for breath. He was caught. There was nothing he could do. More soldiers were pouring down into the gulley, surrounding him on all sides. They studied him curiously murmuring together. Cole shook his head wearily and said nothing.

The huge man with the beard stood directly in front of him, his hands on his hips, looking him up and down. "Don't try to get away," the man said. "You can't get away. Do you understand?"

Cole nodded.

"All right. Good." The man waved. Soldiers clamped metal bands around Cole's arms and wrists. The metal dug into his flesh, making him gasp with pain. More clamps locked around his legs. "Those stay there until we're out of here. A long way out."

"Where—where are you taking me?"

Peter Sherikov studied the variable man for a moment before he answered. "Where? I'm taking you to my labs. Under the Urals." He glanced suddenly up at the sky. "We better hurry. The Security police will be starting their demolition attack in a few hours. We want to be a long way from here when that begins."

Sherikov settled down in his comfortable reinforced chair with a sigh. "It's good to be back." He signalled to one of his guards. "All right. You can unfasten him."

The metal clamps were removed from Cole's arms and legs. He sagged, sinking down in a heap. Sherikov watched him silently.

Cole sat on the floor, rubbing his wrists and legs, saying nothing.

"What do you want?" Sherikov demanded. "Food? Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Medicine? Are you sick? Injured?"

"No."

Sherikov wrinkled his nose. "A bath wouldn't hurt you any. We'll arrange that later." He lit a cigar, blowing a cloud of gray smoke around him. At the door of the room two lab guards stood with guns ready. No one else was in the room beside Sherikov and Cole.

Thomas Cole sat huddled in a heap on the floor, his head sunk down against his chest. He did not stir. His bent body seemed more elongated and stooped than ever, his hair tousled and unkempt, his chin and jowls a rough stubbled gray. His clothes were dirty and torn from crawling through the brush. His skin was cut and scratched; open sores dotted his neck and cheeks and forehead. He said nothing. His chest rose and fell. His faded blue eyes were almost closed. He looked quite old, a withered, dried-up old man.

Sherikov waved one of the guards over. "Have a doctor brought up here. I want this man checked over. He may need intravenous injections. He may not have had anything to eat for awhile."

The guard departed.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," Sherikov said. "Before we go on I'll have you checked over. And deloused at the same time."

Cole said nothing.

Sherikov laughed. "Buck up! You have no reason to feel bad." He leaned toward Cole, jabbing an immense finger at him. "Another two hours and you'd have been dead, out there in the mountains. You know that?"

Cole nodded.

"You don't believe me. Look." Sherikov leaned over and snapped on the vidscreen mounted in the wall. "Watch, this. The operation should still be going on."

The screen lit up. A scene gained form.

"This is a confidential Security channel. I had it tapped several years ago—for my own protection. What we're seeing now is being piped in to Eric Reinhart." Sherikov grinned. "Reinhart arranged what you're seeing on the screen. Pay close attention. You were there, two hours ago."

Cole turned toward the screen. At first he could not make out what was happening. The screen showed a vast foaming cloud, a vortex of motion. From the speaker came a low rumble, a deep-throated roar. After a time the screen shifted, showing a slightly different view. Suddenly Cole stiffened.

He was seeing the destruction of a whole mountain range.

The picture was coming from a ship, flying above what had once been the Albertine Mountain Range. Now there was nothing but swirling clouds of gray and columns of particles and debris, a surging tide of restless material gradually sweeping off and dissipating in all directions.

The Albertine Mountains had been disintegrated. Nothing remained but these vast clouds of debris. Below, on the ground, a ragged plain stretched out, swept by fire and ruin. Gaping wounds yawned, immense holes without bottom, craters side by side as far as the eye could see. Craters and debris. Like the blasted, pitted surface of the moon. Two hours ago it had been rolling peaks and gulleys, brush and green bushes and trees.

Cole turned away.

"You see?" Sherikov snapped the screen off. "You were down there, not so long ago. All that noise and smoke—all for you. All for you, Mr. Variable Man from the past. Reinhart arranged that, to finish you off. I want you to understand that. It's very important that you realize that."

Cole said nothing.

Sherikov reached into a drawer of the table before him. He carefully brought out a small square box and held it out to Cole. "You wired this, didn't you?"

Cole took the box in his hands and held it. For a time his tired mind failed to focus. What did he have? He concentrated on it. The box was the children's toy. The inter-system vidsender, they had called it.

"Yes. I fixed this." He passed it back to Sherikov. "I repaired that. It was broken."

Sherikov gazed down at him intently,

his large eyes bright. He nodded, his black beard and cigar rising and falling. "Good. That's all I wanted to know." He got suddenly to his feet, pushing his chair back. "I see the doctor's here. He'll fix you up. Everything you need. Later on I'll talk to you again."

Unprotesting, Cole got to his feet, allowing the doctor to take hold of his arm and help him up.

After Cole had been released by the medical department, Sherikov joined him in his private dining room, a floor above the actual laboratory.

The Pole gulped down a hasty meal, talking as he ate. Cole sat silently across from him, not eating or speaking. His old clothing had been taken away and new clothing given him. He was shaved and rubbed down. His sores and cuts were healed, his body and hair washed. He looked much healthier and younger, now. But he was still stooped and tired, his blue eyes worn and faded. He listened to Sherikov's account of the world of 2136 AD without comment.

"You can see," Sherikov said finally, waving a chicken leg, "that your appearance here has been very upsetting to our program. Now that you know more about us you can see why Commissioner Reinhart was so interested in destroying you."

Cole nodded.

"Reinhart, you realize, believes that the failure of the SRB machines is the chief danger to the war effort. But that is nothing!" Sherikov pushed his plate away noisily, draining his coffee mug. "After all, wars can be fought without statistical forecasts. The SRB machines only describe. They're nothing more than mechanical onlookers. In themselves, they don't affect the course of the war. We make the war. They only analyze."

Cole nodded.

"More coffee?" Sherikov asked. He pushed the plastic container toward Cole. "Have some."

Cole accepted another cupful. "Thank you."

"You can see that our real problem is another thing entirely. The machines only do figuring for us in a few minutes that eventually we could do for our own selves. They're our servants, tools. Not some sort of gods in a temple which we go and pray to. Not oracles who can see into the future for us. They don't see into the future. They only make statistical predictions—not prophecies. There's a big difference there, but Reinhart doesn't understand it. Reinhart and his kind have made such things as the SRB machines into gods. But I have no gods. At least, not any I can see."

Cole nodded, sipping his coffee.

"I'm telling you all these things because you must understand what we're up against. Terra is hemmed in on all sides by the ancient Centauran Empire. It's been out there for centuries, thousands of years. No one knows how long. It's old—crumbling and rotting. Corrupt and venal. But it holds most of the galaxy around us, and we can't break out of the Sol system. I told you about Icarus, and Hedge's work in ftl flight. We must win the war against Centaurus. We've waited and worked a long time for this, the moment when we can break out and get room among the stars for ourselves.

Icarus is the deciding weapon. The data on Icarus tipped the SRB odds in our favor—for the first time in history. Success in the war against Centaurus will depend on Icarus, not on the SRB machines. You see?"

Cole nodded.

"However, there is a problem. The data on Icarus which I turned over to the machines specified that Icarus would be completed in ten days. More than half that time has already passed. Yet, we are no closer to wiring up the control turret than we were then. The turret baffles us." Sherikov grinned ironically. "Even I have tried my hand at the wiring, but with no success. It's intricate—and small. Too many technical bugs not worked out. We are building only one, you understand. If we had many experimental models worked out before—"

"But this is the experimental model," Cole said.

"And built from the designs of a man dead four years—who isn't here to correct us. We've made Icarus with our own hands, down here in the labs. And he's giving us plenty of trouble." All at once Sherikov got to his feet. "Let's go down to the lab and look at him."

They descended to the floor below, Sherikov leading the way. Cole stopped short at the lab door.

"Quite a sight," Sherikov agreed. "We keep him down here at the bottom for safety's sake. He's well protected. Come on in. We have work to do."

In the center of the lab Icarus rose up, the gray squat cylinder that someday would flash through space at a speed of thousands of times that of light, toward the heart of Proxima Centaurus, over four light years away. Around the cylinder groups of men in uniform were laboring feverishly to finish the remaining work.

"Over here. The turret." Sherikov led Cole over to one side of the room. "It's guarded. Centauran spies are swarming everywhere on Terra. They see into everything. But so do we. That's how we get information for the SRB machines. Spies in both systems."

The translucent globe that was the control turret reposed in the center of a metal stand, an armed guard standing at each side. They lowered their guns as Sherikov approached.

"We don't want anything to happen to this," Sherikov said. "Everything depends on it." He put out his hand for the globe. Half way to it his hand stopped, striking against an invisible presence in the air.

Sherikov laughed. "The wall. Shut it off. It's still on."

One of the guards pressed a stud at his wrist. Around the globe the air shimmered and faded.

"Now." Sherikov's hand closed over the globe. He lifted it carefully from its mount and brought it out for Cole to see. "This is the control turret for our enormous friend here. This is what will slow him down when he's inside Centaurus. He slows down and re-enters this universe. Right in the heart of the star. Then—no more Centaurus." Sherikov beamed. "And no more Armun."

But Cole was not listening. He had taken the globe from Sherikov and was turning it over and over, running his hands over it, his face close to its surface.

He peered down into its interior, his face rapt and intent.

"You can't see the wiring. Not without lenses." Sherikov signalled for a pair of micro-lenses to be brought. He fitted them on Cole's nose, hooking them behind his ears. "Now try it. You can control the magnification. It's set for 1000X right now. You can increase or decrease it."

Cole gasped, swaying back and forth. Sherikov caught hold of him. Cole gazed down into the globe, moving his head slightly, focussing the glasses.

"It takes practice. But you can do a lot with them. Permits you to do microscopic wiring. There are tools to go along, you understand." Sherikov paused, licking his lip. "We can't get it done correctly. Only a few men can wire circuits using the micro-lenses and the little tools. We've tried robots, but there are too many decisions to be made. Robots can't make decisions. They just react."

Cole said nothing. He continued to gaze into the interior of the globe, his lips tight, his body taut and rigid. It made Sherikov feel strangely uneasy.

"You look like one of those old fortune tellers," Sherikov said jokingly, but a cold shiver crawled up his spine. "Better hand it back to me." He held out his hand.

Slowly, Cole returned the globe. After a time he removed the micro-lenses, still deep in thought.

"Well?" Sherikov demanded. "You know what I want. I want you to wire this damn thing up." Sherikov came close to Cole, his big face hard. "You can do it, I think. I could tell by the way you held it—and the job you did on the children's toy, of course. You could wire it up right, and in five days. Nobody else can. And if it's not wired up Centaurus will keep on running the galaxy and Terra will have to sweat it out here in the Sol system. One tiny mediocre sun, one dust mote out of a whole galaxy."

Cole did not answer.

Sherikov became impatient. "Well? What do you say?"

"What happens if I don't wire this control for you? I mean, what happens to me?"

"Then I turn you over to Reinhart. Reinhart will kill you instantly. He thinks you're dead, killed when the Albertine Range was annihilated. If he had any idea I had saved you—"

"I see."

"I brought you down here for one thing. If you wire it up I'll have you sent back to your own time continuum. If you don't—"

Cole considered, his face dark and brooding.

"What do you have to lose? You'd already be dead, if we hadn't pulled you out of those hills."

"Can you really return me to my own time?"

"Of course!"

"Reinhart won't interfere?"

Sherikov laughed. "What can he do? How can he stop me? I have my own men. You saw them. They landed all around you. You'll be returned."

"Yes. I saw your men."

"Then you agree?"

"I agree," Thomas Cole said. "I'll wire it for you. I'll complete the control turret—within the next five days."

4

Three days later Joseph Dixon slid a closed-circuit message plate across the desk to his boss.

"Here. You might be interested in this."

Reinhart picked the plate up slowly. "What is it? You came all the way here to show me this?"

"That's right."

"Why didn't you vidscreen it?"

Dixon smiled grimly. "You'll understand when you decode it. It's from Proxima Centaurus."

"Centaurus!"

"Our counter-intelligence service. They sent it direct to me. Here, I'll decode it for you. Save you the trouble."

Dixon came around behind Reinhart's desk. He leaned over the Commissioner's shoulder, taking hold of the plate and breaking the seal with his thumb nail.

"Hang on," Dixon said. "This is going to hit you hard. According to our agents on Armun, the Centauran High Council has called an emergency session to deal with the problem of Terra's impending attack. Centauran relay couriers have reported to the High Council that the Terran bomb Icarus is virtually complete. Work on the bomb has been rushed through final stages in the underground laboratories under the Ural Range, directed by the Terran physicist Peter Sherikov."

"So I understand from Sherikov himself. Are you surprised the Centaurans know about the bomb? They have spies swarming over Terra. That's no news."

"There's more." Dixon traced the message plate grimly, with an unsteady finger. "The Centauran relay couriers reported that Peter Sherikov brought an expert mechanic out of a previous time continuum to complete the wiring of the turret!"

Reinhart staggered, holding on tight to the desk. He closed his eyes, gasping.

"The variable man is still alive," Dixon murmured. "I don't know how. Or why. There's nothing left of the Albertines. And how the hell did the man get half way around the world?"

Reinhart opened his eyes slowly, his face twisting. "Sherikov! He must have removed him before the attack. I told Sherikov the attack was forthcoming. I gave him the exact hour. He had to get help—from the variable man. He couldn't meet his promise otherwise."

Reinhart leaped up and began to pace back and forth. "I've already informed the SRB machines that the variable man has been destroyed. The machines now show the original 7-6 ratio in our favor. But the ratio is based on false information."

"Then you'll have to withdraw the false data and restore the original situation."

"No." Reinhart shook his head. "I can't do that. The machines must be kept functioning. We can't allow them to jam again. It's too dangerous. If Duffe should become aware that—"

"What are you going to do, then?"

Dixon picked up the message plate. "You can't leave the machines with false data. That's treason."

"The data can't be withdrawn! Not unless equivalent data exists to take its place." Reinhart paced angrily back and forth. "Damn it, I was certain the man was dead. This is an incredible situation. He must be eliminated—at any cost."

Suddenly Reinhart stopped pacing. "The turret. It's probably finished by this time. Correct?"

Dixon nodded slowly in agreement. "With the variable man helping, Sherikov has undoubtedly completed work well ahead of schedule."

Reinhart's gray eyes flickered. "Then he's no longer of any use—even to Sherikov. We could take a chance.... Even if there were active opposition...."

"What's this?" Dixon demanded. "What are you thinking about?"

"How many units are ready for immediate action? How large a force can we raise without notice?"

"Because of the war we're mobilized on a twenty-four hour basis. There are seventy air units and about two hundred surface units. The balance of the Security forces have been transferred to the line, under military control."

"Men?"

"We have about five thousand men ready to go, still on Terra. Most of them in the process of being transferred to military transports. I can hold it up at any time."

"Missiles?"

"Fortunately, the launching tubes have not yet been disassembled. They're still here on Terra. In another few days they'll be moving out for the Colonial fracas."

"Then they're available for immediate use?"

"Yes."

"Good." Reinhart locked his hands, knotting his fingers harshly together in sudden decision. "That will do exactly. Unless I am completely wrong, Sherikov has only a half-dozen air units and no surface cars. And only about two hundred men. Some defense shields, of course..."

"What are you planning?"

Reinhart's face was gray and hard, like stone. "Send out orders for all available Security units to be unified under your immediate command. Have them ready to move by four o'clock this afternoon. We're going to pay a visit," Reinhart stated grimly. "A surprise visit. On Peter Sherikov."

"Stop here," Reinhart ordered.

The surface car slowed to a halt. Reinhart peered cautiously out, studying the horizon ahead.

On all sides a desert of scrub grass and sand stretched out. Nothing moved or stirred. To the right the grass and sand rose up to form immense peaks, a range of mountains without end, disappearing finally into the distance. The Urals.

"Over there," Reinhart said to Dixon, pointing. "See?"

"No."

"Look hard. It's difficult to spot unless you know what to look for. Vertical pipes. Some kind of vent. Or periscopes."

Dixon saw them finally. "I would have driven past without noticing."

"It's well concealed. The main labs are a mile down. Under the range itself. It's virtually impregnable. Sherikov had it built years ago, to withstand any attack. From the air, by surface cars, bombs, missiles—"

"He must feel safe down there."

"No doubt." Reinhart gazed up at the sky. A few faint black dots could be seen, moving lazily about, in broad circles. "Those aren't ours, are they? I gave orders—"

"No. They're not ours. All our units are out of sight. Those belong to Sherikov. His patrol."

Reinhart relaxed. "Good." He reached over and flicked on the vidscreen over the board of the car. "This screen is shielded? It can't be traced?"

"There's no way they can spot it back to us. It's non-directional."

The screen glowed into life. Reinhart punched the combination keys and sat back to wait.

After a time an image formed on the screen. A heavy face, bushy black beard and large eyes.

Peter Sherikov gazed at Reinhart with surprised curiosity. "Commissioner! Where are you calling from? What—"

"How's the work progressing?" Reinhart broke in coldly. "Is Icarus almost complete?"

Sherikov beamed with expansive pride. "He's done, Commissioner. Two days ahead of time. Icarus is ready to be launched into space. I tried to call your office, but they told me—"

"I'm not at my office." Reinhart leaned toward the screen. "Open your entrance tunnel at the surface. You're about to receive visitors."

Sherikov blinked. "Visitors?"

"I'm coming down to see you. About Icarus. Have the tunnel opened for me at once."

"Exactly where are you, Commissioner?"

"On the surface."

Sherikov's eyes flickered. "Oh? But—"

"Open up!" Reinhart snapped. He glanced at his wristwatch. "I'll be at the entrance in five minutes. I expect to find it ready for me."

"Of course." Sherikov nodded in bewilderment. "I'm always glad to see you, Commissioner. But I—"

"Five minutes, then." Reinhart cut the circuit. The screen died. He turned quickly to Dixon. "You stay up here, as we arranged. I'll go down with one company of police. You understand the necessity of exact timing on this?"

"We won't slip up. Everything's ready. All units are in their places."

"Good." Reinhart pushed the door open for him. "You join your directional staff. I'll proceed toward the tunnel entrance."

"Good luck." Dixon leaped out of the car, onto the sandy ground. A gust of dry air swirled into the car around Reinhart. "I'll see you later."

Reinhart slammed the door. He turned to the group of police crouched in the rear of the car, their guns held tightly. "Here we go," Reinhart murmured. "Hold on."

The car raced across the sandy ground, toward the tunnel entrance to

Sherikov's underground fortress.

Sherikov met Reinhart at the bottom end of the tunnel, where the tunnel opened up onto the main floor of the lab.

The big Pole approached, his hand out, beaming with pride and satisfaction. "It's a pleasure to see you, Commissioner. This is an historic moment."

Reinhart got out of the car, with his group of armed Security police. "Calls for a celebration, doesn't it?" he said.

"That's a good idea! We're two days ahead, Commissioner. The SRB machines will be interested. The odds should change abruptly at the news."

"Let's go down to the lab. I want to see the control turret myself."

A shadow crossed Sherikov's face. "I'd rather not bother the workmen right now, Commissioner. They've been under a great load, trying to complete the turret in time. I believe they're putting a few last finishes on it at this moment."

"We can view them by vidscreen. I'm curious to see them at work. It must be difficult to wire such minute relays."

Sherikov shook his head. "Sorry, Commissioner. No vidscreen on them. I won't allow it. This is too important. Our whole future depends on it."

Reinhart snapped a signal to his company of police. "Put this man under arrest."

Sherikov blanched. His mouth fell open. The police moved quickly around him, their gun tubes up, jabbing into him. He was searched rapidly, efficiently. His gun belt and concealed energy screen were yanked off.

"What's going on?" Sherikov demanded, some color returning to his face. "What are you doing?"

"You're under arrest for the duration of the war. You're relieved of all authority. From now on one of my men will operate Designs. When the war is over you'll be tried before the Council and President Duffe."

Sherikov shook his head, dazed. "I don't understand. What's this all about? Explain it to me, Commissioner. What's happened?"

Reinhart signalled to his police. "Get ready. We're going into the lab. We may have to shoot our way in. The variable man should be in the area of the bomb, working on the control turret."

Instantly Sherikov's face hardened. His black eyes glittered, alert and hostile.

Reinhart laughed harshly. "We received a counter-intelligence report from Centaurus. I'm surprised at you, Sherikov. You know the Centaurans are everywhere with their relay couriers. You should have known—"

Sherikov moved. Fast. All at once he broke away from the police, throwing his massive body against them. They fell, scattering. Sherikov ran—directly at the wall. The police fired wildly. Reinhart fumbled frantically for his gun tube, pulling it up.

Sherikov reached the wall, running head down, energy beams flashing around him. He struck against the wall—and vanished.

"Down!" Reinhart shouted. He dropped to his hands and knees. All around him his police dived for the floor. Reinhart cursed wildly, dragging himself quickly toward the door. They had to get

out, and right away. Sherikov had escaped. A false wall, an energy barrier set to respond to his pressure. He had dashed through it to safety. He—

From all sides an inferno burst, a flaming roar of death surging over them, around them, on every side. The room was alive with blazing masses of destruction, bouncing from wall to wall. They were caught between four banks of power, all of them open to full discharge. A trap—a death trap.

Reinhart reached the hall gasping for breath. He leaped to his feet. A few Security police followed him. Behind them, in the flaming room, the rest of the company screamed and struggled, blasted out of existence by the leaping bursts of power.

Reinhart assembled his remaining men. Already, Sherikov's guards were forming. At one end of the corridor a snub-barreled robot gun was maneuvering into position. A siren wailed. Guards were running on all sides, hurrying to battle stations.

The robot gun opened fire. Part of the corridor exploded, bursting into fragments. Clouds of choking debris and particles swept around them. Reinhart and his police retreated, moving back along the corridor.

They reached a junction. A second robot gun was rumbling toward them, hurrying to get within range. Reinhart fired carefully, aiming at its delicate control. Abruptly the gun spun convulsively. It lashed against the wall, smashing itself into the unyielding metal. Then it collapsed in a heap, gears still whining and spinning.

"Come on." Reinhart moved away, crouching and running. He glanced at his watch. Almost time. A few more minutes. A group of lab guards appeared ahead of them. Reinhart fired. Behind him his police fired past him, violet shafts of energy catching the group of guards as they entered the corridor. The guards spilled apart, falling and twisting. Part of them settled into dust, drifting down the corridor. Reinhart made his way toward the lab, crouching and leaping, pushing past heaps of debris and remains, followed by his men. "Come on! Don't stop!"

Suddenly from around them the booming, enlarged voice of Sherikov thundered, magnified by rows of wall speakers along the corridor. Reinhart halted, glancing around.

"Reinhart! You haven't got a chance. You'll never get back to the surface. Throw down your guns and give up. You're surrounded on all sides. You're a mile, under the surface."

Reinhart threw himself into motion, pushing into billowing clouds of particles drifting along the corridor. "Are you sure, Sherikov?" he grunted.

Sherikov laughed, his harsh, metallic peals rolling in waves against Reinhart's eardrums. "I don't want to have to kill you, Commissioner. You're vital to the war: I'm sorry you found out about the variable man. I admit we overlooked the Centauran espionage as a factor in this. But now that you know about him—"

Suddenly Sherikov's voice broke off. A deep rumble had shaken the floor, a lapping vibration that shuddered

through the corridor.

Reinhart sagged with relief. He peered through the clouds of debris, making out the figures on his watch. Right on time. Not a second late.

The first of the hydrogen missiles, launched from the Council buildings on the other side of the world, were beginning to arrive. The attack had begun.

At exactly six o'clock Joseph Dixon, standing on the surface four miles from the entrance tunnel, gave the sign to the waiting units.

The first job was to break down Sherikov's defense screens. The missiles had to penetrate without interference. At Dixon's signal a fleet of thirty Security ships dived from a height of ten miles, swooping above the mountains, directly over the underground laboratories. Within five minutes the defense screens had been smashed, and all the tower projectors leveled flat. Now the mountains were virtually unprotected.

"So far so good," Dixon murmured, as he watched from his secure position. The fleet of Security ships roared back, their work done. Across the face of the desert the police surface cars were crawling rapidly toward the entrance tunnel, snaking from side to side.

Meanwhile, Sherikov's counter-attack had begun to go into operation.

Guns mounted among the hills opened fire. Vast columns of flame burst up in the path of the advancing cars. The cars hesitated and retreated, as the plain was churned up by a howling vortex, a thundering chaos of explosions. Here and there a car vanished in a cloud of particles. A group of cars moving away suddenly scattered, caught up by a giant wind that lashed across them and swept them up into the air.

Dixon gave orders to have the cannon silenced. The police air arm again swept overhead, a sullen roar of jets that shook the ground below. The police ships divided expertly and hurtled down on the cannon protecting the hills.

The cannon forgot the surface cars and lifted their snouts to meet the attack. Again and again the airships came, rocking the mountains with titanic blasts.

The guns became silent. Their echoing boom diminished, died away reluctantly, as bombs took critical toll of them.

Dixon watched with satisfaction as the bombing came to an end. The airships rose in a thick swarm, black gnats shooting up in triumph from a dead carcass. They hurried back as emergency anti-aircraft robot guns swung into position and saturated the sky with blazing puffs of energy.

Dixon checked his wristwatch. The missiles were already on the way from North America. Only a few minutes remained.

The surface cars, freed by the successful bombing, began to regroup for a new frontal attack. Again they crawled forward, across the burning plain, bearing down cautiously on the battered wall of mountains, heading toward the twisted wrecks that had been the ring of defense guns. Toward the entrance tunnel.

An occasional cannon fired feebly at them. The cars came grimly on. Now, in the hollows of the hills, Sherikov's troops were hurrying to the surface to meet the attack. The first car reached the shadow

of the mountains....

A deafening hail of fire burst loose. Small robot guns appeared everywhere, needle barrels emerging from behind hidden screens, trees and shrubs, rocks, stones. The police cars were caught in a withering cross-fire, trapped at the base of the hills.

Down the slopes Sherikov's guards raced, toward the stalled cars. Clouds of heat rose up and boiled across the plain as the cars fired up at the running men. A robot gun dropped like a slug onto the plain and screamed toward the cars, firing as it came.

Dixon twisted nervously. Only a few minutes. Any time, now. He shaded his eyes and peered up at the sky. No sign of them yet. He wondered about Reinhart. No signal had come up from below. Clearly, Reinhart had run into trouble. No doubt there was desperate fighting going on in the maze of underground tunnels, the intricate web of passages that honeycombed the earth below the mountains.

In the air, Sherikov's few defense ships were taking on the police raiders. Outnumbered, the defense ships darted rapidly, wildly, putting up a futile fight.

Sherikov's guards streamed out onto the plain. Crouching and running, they advanced toward the stalled cars. The police airships screeched down at them, guns thundering.

Dixon held his breath. When the missiles arrived—

The first missile struck. A section of the mountain vanished, turned to smoke and foaming gasses. The wave of heat slapped Dixon across the face, spinning him around. Quickly he re-entered his ship and took off, shooting rapidly away from the scene. He glanced back. A second and third missile had arrived. Great gaping pits yawned among the mountains, vast sections missing like broken teeth. Now the missiles could penetrate to the underground laboratories below.

On the ground, the surface cars halted beyond the danger area, waiting for the missile attack to finish. When the eighth missile had struck, the cars again moved forward. No more missiles fell.

Dixon swung his ship around, heading back toward the scene. The laboratory was exposed. The top sections of it had been ripped open. The laboratory lay like a tin can, torn apart by mighty explosions, its first floors visible from the air. Men and cars were pouring down into it, fighting with the guards swarming to the surface.

Dixon watched intently. Sherikov's men were bringing up heavy guns, big robot artillery. But the police ships were diving again. Sherikov's defensive patrols had been cleaned from the sky. The police ships whined down, arcing over the exposed laboratory. Small bombs fell, whistling down, pin-pointing the artillery rising to the surface on the remaining lift stages.

Abruptly Dixon's vidscreen clicked. Dixon turned toward it.

Reinhart's features formed. "Call off the attack." His uniform was torn. A deep bloody gash crossed his cheek. He grinned sourly at Dixon, pushing his tangled hair back out of his face. "Quite a fight."

"Sherikov—"

"He's called off his guards. We've agreed to a truce. It's all over. No more needed." Reinhart gasped for breath, wiping grime and sweat from his neck. "Land your ship and come down here at once."

"The variable man?"

"That comes next," Reinhart said grimly. He adjusted his gun tube. "I want you down here, for that part. I want you to be in on the kill."

Reinhart turned away from the vidscreen. In the corner of the room Sherikov stood silently, saying frothing. "Well?" Reinhart barked. "Where is he? Where will I find him?"

Sherikov licked his lips nervously, glancing up at Reinhart. "Commissioner, are you sure—"

"The attack has been called off. Your labs are safe. So is your life. Now it's your turn to come through." Reinhart gripped his gun, moving toward Sherikov. "Where is he?"

For a moment Sherikov hesitated. Then slowly his huge body sagged, defeated. He shook his head wearily. "All right. I'll show you where he is." His voice was hardly audible, a dry whisper. "Down this way. Come on."

Reinhart followed Sherikov out of the room, into the corridor. Police and guards were working rapidly, clearing the debris and ruins away, putting out the hydrogen fires that burned everywhere. "No tricks, Sherikov."

"No tricks." Sherikov nodded resignedly. "Thomas Cole is by himself. In a wing lab off the main rooms."

"Cole?"

"The variable man. That's his name." The Pole turned his massive head a little. "He has a name."

Reinhart waved his gun. "Hurry up. I don't want anything to go wrong. This is the part I came for."

"You must remember something, Commissioner."

"What is it?"

Sherikov stopped walking. "Commissioner, nothing must happen to the globe. The control turret. Everything depends on it, the war, our whole—"

"I know. Nothing will happen to the damn thing. Let's go."

"If it should get damaged—"

"I'm not after the globe. I'm interested only in—in Thomas Cole."

They came to the end of the corridor and stopped before a metal door. Sherikov nodded at the door. "In there."

Reinhart moved back. "Open the door."

"Open it yourself. I don't want to have anything to do with it."

Reinhart shrugged. He stepped up to the door. Holding his gun level he raised his hand, passing it in front of the eye circuit. Nothing happened.

Reinhart frowned. He pushed the door with his hand. The door slid open. Reinhart was looking into a small laboratory. He glimpsed a workbench, tools, heaps of equipment, measuring devices, and in the center of the bench the transparent globe, the control turret.

"Cole?" Reinhart advanced quickly into the room. He glanced around him, suddenly alarmed. "Where—"

The room was empty. Thomas Cole was gone.

When the first missile struck, Cole stopped work and sat listening.

Far off, a distant rumble rolled through the earth, shaking the floor under him. On the bench, tools and equipment danced up and down. A pair of pliers fell crashing to the floor. A box of screws tipped over, spilling its minute contents out.

Cole listened for a time. Presently he lifted the transparent globe from the bench. With carefully controlled hands he held the globe up, running his fingers gently over the surface, his faded blue eyes thoughtful. Then, after a time, he placed the globe back on the bench, in its mount.

The globe was finished. A faint glow of pride moved through the variable man. The globe was the finest job he had ever done.

The deep rumblings ceased. Cole became instantly alert. He jumped down from his stool, hurrying across the room to the door. For a moment he stood by the door listening intently. He could hear noise on the other side, shouts, guards rushing past, dragging heavy equipment, working frantically.

A rolling crash echoed down the corridor and lapped against his door. The concussion spun him around. Again a tide of energy shook the walls and floor and sent him down on his knees.

The lights flickered and winked out.

Cole fumbled in the dark until he found a flashlight. Power failure. He could hear crackling flames. Abruptly the lights came on again, an ugly yellow, then faded back out. Cole bent down and examined the door with his flashlight. A magnetic lock. Dependent on an externally induced electric flux. He grabbed a screwdriver and pried at the door. For a moment it held. Then it fell open.

Cole stepped warily out into the corridor. Everything was in shambles. Guards wandered everywhere, burned and half-blinded. Two lay groaning under a pile of wrecked equipment. Fused guns, reeking metal. The air was heavy with the smell of burning wiring and plastic. A thick cloud that choked him and made him bend double as he advanced.

"Halt," a guard gasped feebly, struggling to rise. Cole pushed past him and down the corridor. Two small robot guns, still functioning, glided past him hurriedly toward the drumming chaos of battle. He followed.

At a major intersection the fight was in full swing. Sherikov's guards fought Security police, crouched behind pillars and barricades, firing wildly, desperately. Again the whole structure shuddered as a great booming blast ignited some place above. Bombs? Shells?

Cole threw himself down as a violet beam cut past his ear and disintegrated the wall behind him. A Security policeman, wild-eyed, firing erratically. One of Sherikov's guards winged him and his gun skidded to the floor.

A robot cannon turned toward him as he made his way past the intersection. He began to run. The cannon rolled along behind him, aiming itself uncertainly. Cole hunched over as he shambled rapidly along, gasping for breath. In the flickering yellow light he saw a handful of Security police advancing, firing expertly, intent on a line of defense

Sherikov's guards had hastily set up.

The robot cannon altered its course to take them on, and Cole escaped around a corner.

He was in the main lab, the big chamber where Icarus himself rose, the vast squat column.

Icarus! A solid wall of guards surrounded him, grim-faced, hugging guns and protection shields. But the Security police were leaving Icarus alone. Nobody wanted to damage him. Cole evaded a lone guard tracking him and reached the far side of the lab.

It took him only a few seconds to find the force field generator. There was no switch. For a moment that puzzled him—and then he remembered. The guard had controlled it from his wrist.

Too late to worry about that. With his screwdriver he unfastened the plate over the generator and ripped out the wiring in handfuls. The generator came loose and he dragged it away from the wall. The screen was off, thank God. He managed to carry the generator into a side corridor.

Crouched in a heap, Cole bent over the generator, deft fingers flying. He pulled the wiring to him and laid it out on the floor, tracing the circuits with feverish haste.

The adaptation was easier than he had expected. The screen flowed at right angles to the wiring, for a distance of six feet. Each lead was shielded on one side; the field radiated outward, leaving a hollow cone in the center. He ran the wiring through his belt, down his trouser legs, under his shirt, all the way to his wrists and ankles.

He was just snatching up the heavy generator when two Security police appeared. They raised their blasters and fired point-blank.

Cole clicked on the screen. A vibration leaped through him that snapped his jaw and danced up his body. He staggered away, half-stupefied by the surging force that radiated out from him. The violet rays struck the field and deflected harmlessly.

He was safe.

He hurried on down the corridor, past a ruined gun and sprawled bodies still clutching blasters. Great drifting clouds of radioactive particles billowed around him. He edged by one cloud nervously. Guards lay everywhere, dying and dead, partly destroyed, eaten and corroded by the hot metallic salts in the air. He had to get out—and fast.

At the end of the corridor a whole section of the fortress was in ruins. Towering flames leaped on all sides. One of the missiles had penetrated below ground level.

Cole found a lift that still functioned. A load of wounded guards was being raised to the surface. None of them paid any attention to him. Flames surged around the lift, licking at the wounded. Workmen were desperately trying to get the lift into action. Cole leaped onto the lift. A moment later it began to rise, leaving the shouts and the flames behind.

The lift emerged on the surface and Cole jumped off. A guard spotted him and gave chase. Crouching, Cole dodged into a tangled mass of twisted metal, still white-hot and smoking. He ran for a distance, leaping from the side of a

ruined defense-screen tower, onto the fused ground and down the side of a hill. The ground was hot underfoot. He hurried as fast as he could, gasping for breath. He came to a long slope and scrambled up the side.

The guard who had followed was gone, lost behind in the rolling clouds of ash that drifted from the ruins of Sherikov's underground fortress.

Cole reached the top of the hill. For a brief moment he halted to get his breath and figure where he was. It was almost evening. The sun was beginning to set. In the darkening sky a few dots still twisted and rolled, black specks that abruptly burst into flame and fused out again.

Cole stood up cautiously, peering around him. Ruins stretched out below, on all sides, the furnace from which he had escaped. A chaos of incandescent metal and debris, gutted and wrecked beyond repair. Miles of tangled rubbish and half-vaporized equipment.

He considered. Everyone was busy putting out the fires and pulling the wounded to safety. It would be awhile before he was missed. But as soon as they realized he was gone they'd be after him. Most of the laboratory had been destroyed. Nothing lay back that way.

Beyond the ruins lay the great Ural peaks, the endless mountains, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

Mountains and green forests. A wilderness. They'd never find him there.

Cole started along the side of the hill, walking slowly and carefully, his screen generator under his arm. Probably in the confusion he could find enough food and equipment to last him indefinitely. He could wait until early morning, then circle back toward the ruins and load up. With a few tools and his own innate skill he would get along fine. A screwdriver, hammer, nails, odds and ends—

A great hum sounded in his ears. It swelled to a deafening roar. Startled, Cole whirled around. A vast shape filled the sky behind him, growing each moment. Cole stood frozen, utterly transfixed. The shape thundered over him, above his head, as he stood stupidly, rooted to the spot.

Then, awkwardly, uncertainly, he began to run. He stumbled and fell and rolled a short distance down the side of the hill. Desperately, he struggled to hold onto the ground. His hands dug wildly, futilely, into the soft soil, trying to keep the generator under his arm at the same time.

A flash, and a blinding spark of light around him.

The spark picked him up and tossed him like a dry leaf. He grunted in agony as searing fire crackled about him, a blazing inferno that gnawed and ate hungrily through his screen. He spun dizzily and fell through the cloud of fire, down into a pit of darkness, a vast gulf between two hills. His wiring ripped off. The generator tore out of his grip and was lost behind. Abruptly, his force field ceased.

Cole lay in the darkness at the bottom of the hill. His whole body shrieked in agony as the unholy fire played over him. He was a blazing cinder, a half-consumed ash flaming in a universe of darkness. The pain made him twist and crawl like an insect, trying to burrow into the

ground. He screamed and shrieked and struggled to escape, to get away from the hideous fire. To reach the curtain of darkness beyond, where it was cool and silent, where the flames couldn't crackle and eat at him.

He reached imploringly out, into the darkness, groping feebly toward it, trying to pull himself into it. Gradually, the glowing orb that was his own body faded. The impenetrable chaos of night descended. He allowed the tide to sweep over him, to extinguish the searing fire.

Dixon landed his ship expertly, bringing it to a halt in front of an overturned defense tower. He leaped out and hurried across the smoking ground.

From a lift Reinhart appeared, surrounded by his Security police. "He got away from us! He escaped!"

"He didn't escape," Dixon answered. "I got him myself."

Reinhart quivered violently. "What do you mean?"

"Come along with me. Over in this direction." He and Reinhart climbed the side of a demolished hill, both of them panting for breath. "I was landing. I saw a figure emerge from a lift and run toward the mountains, like some sort of animal. When he came out in the open I dived on him and released a phosphorus bomb."

"Then he's—dead?"

"I don't see how anyone could have lived through a phosphorus bomb." They reached the top of the hill. Dixon halted, then pointed excitedly down into the pit beyond the hill. "There!"

They descended cautiously. The ground was singed and burned clean. Clouds of smoke hung heavily in the air. Occasional fires still flickered here and there. Reinhart coughed and bent over to see. Dixon flashed on a pocket flare and set it beside the body.

The body was charred, half destroyed by the burning phosphorus. It lay motionless, one arm over its face, mouth open, legs sprawled grotesquely. Like some abandoned rag doll, tossed in an incinerator and consumed almost beyond recognition.

"He's alive!" Dixon muttered. He felt around curiously. "Must have had some kind of protection screen. Amazing that a man could—"

"It's him? It's really him?"

"Fits the description." Dixon tore away a handful of burned clothing. "This is the variable man. What's left of him, at least."

Reinhart sagged with relief. "Then we've finally got him. The data is accurate. He's no longer a factor."

Dixon got out his blaster and released the safety catch thoughtfully. "If you want, I can finish the job right now."

At that moment Sherikov appeared, accompanied by two armed Security police. He strode grimly down the hillside, black eyes snapping. "Did Cole—" He broke off. "Good God."

"Dixon got him with a phosphorus bomb," Reinhart said noncommittally. "He had reached the surface and was trying to get into the mountains."

Sherikov turned wearily away. "He was an amazing person. During the attack he managed to force the lock on his door and escape. The guards fired at him, but nothing happened. He had

rigged up some kind of force field around him. Something he adapted."

"Anyhow, it's over with," Reinhart answered. "Did you have SRB plates made up on him?"

Sherikov reached slowly into his coat. He drew out a manila envelope. "Here's all the information I collected about him, while he was with me."

"Is it complete? Everything previous has been merely fragmentary."

"As near complete as I could make it. It includes photographs and diagrams of the interior of the globe. The turret wiring he did for me. I haven't had a chance even to look at them." Sherikov fingered the envelope. "What are you going to do with Cole?"

"Have him loaded up, taken back to the city—and officially put to sleep by the Euthanasia Ministry."

"Legal murder?" Sherikov's lips twisted. "Why don't you simply do it right here and get it over with?"

Reinhart grabbed the envelope and stuck it in his pocket. "I'll turn this right over to the machines." He motioned to Dixon. "Let's go. Now we can notify the fleet to prepare for the attack on Centaurus." He turned briefly back to Sherikov. "When can Icarus be launched?"

"In an hour or so, I suppose. They're locking the control turret in place. Assuming it functions correctly, that's all that's needed."

"Good. I'll notify Duffe to send out the signal to the warfleet." Reinhart nodded to the police to take Sherikov to the waiting Security ship. Sherikov moved off dully, his face gray and haggard. Cole's inert body was picked up and tossed onto a freight cart. The cart rumbled into the hold of the Security ship and the lock slid shut after it.

"It'll be interesting to see how the machines respond to the additional data," Dixon said.

"It should make quite an improvement in the odds," Reinhart agreed. He patted the envelope, bulging in his inside pocket. "We're two days ahead of time."

Margaret Duffe got up slowly from her desk. She pushed her chair automatically back. "Let me get all this straight. You mean the bomb is finished? Ready to go?"

Reinhart nodded impatiently. "That's what I said. The Technicians are checking the turret locks to make sure it's properly attached. The launching will take place in half an hour."

"Thirty minutes! Then—"

"Then the attack can begin at once. I assume the fleet is ready for action."

"Of course. It's been ready for several days. But I can't believe the bomb is ready so soon." Margaret Duffe moved numbly toward the door of her office. "This is a great day, Commissioner. An old era lies behind us. This time tomorrow Centaurus will be gone. And eventually the colonies will be ours."

"It's been a long climb," Reinhart murmured.

"One thing. Your charge against Sherikov. It seems incredible that a person of his caliber could ever—"

"We'll discuss that later," Reinhart interrupted coldly. He pulled the manila envelope from his coat. "I haven't had an opportunity to feed the additional data

to the SRB machines. If you'll excuse me, I'll do that now."

For a moment Margaret Duffe stood at the door. The two of them faced each other silently, neither speaking, a faint smile on Reinhart's thin lips, hostility in the woman's blue eyes.

"Reinhart, sometimes I think perhaps you'll go too far. And sometimes I think you've already gone too far...."

"I'll inform you of any change in the odds showing." Reinhart strode past her, out of the office and down the hall. He headed toward the SRB room, an intense thalamic excitement rising up inside him.

A few moments later he entered the SRB room. He made his way to the machines. The odds 7-6 showed in the view windows. Reinhart smiled a little. 7-6. False odds, based on incorrect information. Now they could be removed.

Kaplan hurried over. Reinhart handed him the envelope, and moved over to the window, gazing down at the scene below. Men and cars scurried frantically everywhere. Officials coming and going like ants, hurrying in all directions.

The war was on. The signal had been sent out to the warfleet that had waited so long near Proxima Centaurus. A feeling of triumph raced through Reinhart. He had won. He had destroyed the man from the past and broken Peter Sherikov. The war had begun as planned. Terra was breaking out. Reinhart smiled thinly. He had been completely successful.

"Commissioner."

Reinhart turned slowly. "All right."

Kaplan was standing in front of the machines, gazing down at the reading. "Commissioner—"

Sudden alarm plucked at Reinhart. There was something in Kaplan's voice. He hurried quickly over. "What is it?"

Kaplan looked up at him, his face white, his eyes wide with terror. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came.

"What is it?" Reinhart demanded, chilled. He bent toward the machines, studying the reading.

And sickened with horror.

100-1. Against Terra!

He could not tear his gaze away from the figures. He was numb, shocked with disbelief. 100-1. What had happened? What had gone wrong? The turret was finished, Icarus was ready, the fleet had been notified—

There was a sudden deep buzz from outside the building. Shouts drifted up from below. Reinhart turned his head slowly toward the window, his heart frozen with fear.

Across the evening sky a trail moved, rising each moment. A thin line of white. Something climbed, gaining speed each moment. On the ground, all eyes were turned toward it, awed faces peering up.

The object gained speed. Faster and faster. Then it vanished. Icarus was on his way. The attack had begun; it was too late to stop, now.

And on the machines the odds read a hundred to one—for failure.

At eight o'clock in the evening of May 15, 2136, Icarus was launched toward the star Centaurus. A day later, while all Terra waited, Icarus entered the star, traveling at thousands of times the speed of light.

Nothing happened. Icarus disap-

peared into the star. There was no explosion. The bomb failed to go off.

At the same time the Terran warfleet engaged the Centauran outer fleet, sweeping down in a concentrated attack. Twenty major ships were seized. A good part of the Centauran fleet was destroyed. Many of the captive systems began to revolt, in the hope of throwing off the Imperial bonds.

Two hours later the massed Centauran warfleet from Armun abruptly appeared and joined battle. The great struggle illuminated half the Centauran system. Ship after ship flashed briefly and then faded to ash. For a whole day the two fleets fought, strung out over millions of miles of space. Innumerable fighting men died—on both sides.

At last the remains of the battered Terran fleet turned and limped toward Armun—defeated. Little of the once impressive armada remained. A few blackened hulks, making their way uncertainly toward captivity.

Icarus had not functioned. Centaurus had not exploded. The attack was a failure.

The war was over.

"We've lost the war," Margaret Duffe said in a small voice, wondering and awed. "It's over. Finished."

The Council members sat in their places around the conference table, gray-haired elderly men, none of them speaking or moving. All gazed up mutely at the great stellar maps that covered two walls of the chamber.

"I have already empowered negotiators to arrange a truce," Margaret Duffe murmured. "Orders have been sent out to Vice-Commander Jessup to give up the battle. There's no hope. Fleet Commander Carleton destroyed himself and his flagship a few minutes ago. The Centauran High Council has agreed to end the fighting. Their whole Empire is rotten to the core. Ready to topple of its own weight."

Reinhart was slumped over at the table, his head in his hands. "I don't understand.... Why? Why didn't the bomb explode?" He mopped his forehead shakily. All his poise was gone. He was trembling and broken. "What went wrong?"

Gray-faced, Dixon mumbled an answer. "The variable man must have sabotaged the turret. The SRB machines knew.... They analyzed the data. They knew! But it was too late."

Reinhart's eyes were bleak with despair as he raised his head a little. "I knew he'd destroy us. We're finished. A century of work and planning." His body knotted in a spasm of furious agony. "All because of Sherikov!"

Margaret Duffe eyed Reinhart coldly. "Why because of Sherikov?"

"He kept Cole alive! I wanted him killed from the start." Suddenly Reinhart jumped from his chair. His hand clutched convulsively at his gun. "And he's still alive! Even if we've lost I'm going to have the pleasure of putting a blast beam through Cole's chest!"

"Sit down!" Margaret Duffe ordered.

Reinhart was half way to the door. "He's still at the Euthanasia Ministry, waiting for the official—"

"No, he's not," Margaret Duffe said.

Reinhart froze. He turned slowly, as

if unable to believe his senses. "What?"

"Cole isn't at the Ministry. I ordered him transferred and your instructions cancelled."

"Where—where is he?"

There was unusual hardness in Margaret Duffe's voice as she answered. "With Peter Sherikov. In the Urals. I had Sherikov's full authority restored. I then had Cole transferred there, put in Sherikov's safe keeping. I want to make sure Cole recovers, so we can keep our promise to him—our promise to return him to his own time."

Reinhart's mouth opened and closed. All the color had drained from his face. His cheek muscles twitched spasmodically. At last he managed to speak. "You've gone insane! The traitor responsible for Earth's greatest defeat—"

"We have lost the war," Margaret Duffe stated quietly. "But this is not a day of defeat. It is a day of victory. The most incredible victory Terra has ever had."

Reinhart and Dixon were dumbfounded. "What—" Reinhart gasped. "What do you—" The whole room was in an uproar. All the Council members were on their feet. Reinhart's words were drowned out.

"Sherikov will explain when he gets here," Margaret Duffe's calm voice came. "He's the one who discovered it." She looked around the chamber at the incredulous Council members. "Everyone stay in his seat. You are all to remain here until Sherikov arrives. It's vital you hear what he has to say. His news transforms this whole situation."

Peter Sherikov accepted the briefcase of papers from his armed technician. "Thanks." He pushed his chair back and glanced thoughtfully around the Council chamber. "Is everybody ready to hear what I have to say?"

"We're ready," Margaret Duffe answered. The Council members sat alertly around the table. At the far end, Reinhart and Dixon watched uneasily as the big Pole removed papers from his briefcase and carefully examined them.

"To begin, I recall to you the original work behind the ftl bomb. Jamison Hedge was the first human to propel an object at a speed greater than light. As you know, that object diminished in length and gained in mass as it moved toward light speed. When it reached that speed it vanished. It ceased to exist in our terms. Having no length it could not occupy space. It rose to a different order of existence.

"When Hedge tried to bring the object back, an explosion occurred Hedge was killed, and all his equipment was destroyed. The force of the blast was beyond calculation. Hedge had placed his observation ship many millions of miles away. It was not far enough, however. Originally, he had hoped his drive might be used for space travel. But after his death the principle was abandoned.

"That is—until Icarus. I saw the possibilities of a bomb, an incredibly powerful bomb to destroy Centaurus and all the Empire's forces. The reappearance of Icarus would mean the annihilation of their System. As Hedge had shown, the object would re-enter space already occupied by matter, and the cataclysm would be beyond belief."

"But Icarus never came back,"

Reinhart cried. "Cole altered the wiring so the bomb kept on going. It's probably still going."

"Wrong," Sherikov boomed. "The bomb did reappear. But it didn't explode."

Reinhart reacted violently. "You mean—"

"The bomb came back, dropping below the ftl speed as soon as it entered the star Proxima. But it did not explode. There was no cataclysm. It reappeared and was absorbed by the sun, turned into gas at once."

"Why didn't it explode?" Dixon demanded.

"Because Thomas Cole solved Hedge's problem. He found a way to bring the ftl object back into this universe without collision. Without an explosion. The variable man found what Hedge was after...."

The whole Council was on its feet. A growing murmur filled the chamber, a rising pandemonium breaking out on all sides.

"I don't believe it!" Reinhart gasped. "It isn't possible. If Cole solved Hedge's problem that would mean—" He broke off, staggered.

"Faster than light drive can now be used for space travel," Sherikov continued, waving the noise down. "As Hedge intended. My men have studied the photographs of the control turret. They don't know how or why, yet. But we have complete records of the turret. We can duplicate the wiring, as soon as the laboratories have been repaired."

Comprehension was gradually beginning to settle over the room. "Then it'll be possible to build ftl ships," Margaret Duffe murmured, dazed. "And if we can do that—"

"When I showed him the control turret, Cole understood its purpose. Not my purpose, but the original purpose Hedge had been working toward. Cole realized Icarus was actually an incomplete spaceship, not a bomb at all. He saw what Hedge had seen, an ftl space drive. He set out to make Icarus work."

"We can go beyond Centaurus," Dixon muttered. His lips twisted. "Then the war was trivial. We can leave the Empire completely behind. We can go beyond the galaxy."

"The whole universe is open to us," Sherikov agreed. "Instead of taking over an antiquated Empire, we have the entire cosmos to map and explore, God's total creation."

Margaret Duffe got to her feet and moved slowly toward the great stellar maps that towered above them at the far end of the chamber. She stood for a long time, gazing up at the myriad suns, the legions of systems, awed by what she saw.

"Do you suppose he realized all this?" she asked suddenly. "What we can see, here on these maps?"

"Thomas Cole is a strange person," Sherikov said, half to himself. "Apparently he has a kind of intuition about machines, the way things are supposed to work. An intuition more in his hands than in his head. A kind of genius, such as a painter or a pianist has. Not a scientist. He has no verbal knowledge about things, no semantic references. He deals with the things themselves. Directly.

"I doubt very much if Thomas Cole understood what would come about. He looked into the globe, the control turret. He saw unfinished wiring and relays. He saw a job half done. An incomplete machine."

"Something to be fixed," Margaret Duffe put in.

"Something to be fixed. Like an artist, he saw his work ahead of him. He was interested in only one thing: turning out the best job he could, with the skill he possessed. For us, that skill has opened up a whole universe, endless galaxies and systems to explore. Worlds without end. Unlimited, untouched worlds."

Reinhart got unsteadily to his feet. "We better get to work. Start organizing construction teams. Exploration crews. We'll have to reconvert from war production to ship designing. Begin the manufacture of mining and scientific instruments for survey work."

"That's right," Margaret Duffe said. She looked reflectively up at him. "But you're not going to have anything to do with it."

Reinhart saw the expression on her face. His hand flew to his gun and he backed quickly toward the door. Dixon leaped up and joined him. "Get back!" Reinhart shouted.

Margaret Duffe signalled and a phalanx of Government troops closed in around the two men. Grim-faced, efficient soldiers with magnetic grapples ready.

Reinhart's blaster wavered—toward the Council members sitting shocked in their seats, and toward Margaret Duffe, straight at her blue eyes. Reinhart's features were distorted with insane fear. "Get back! Don't anybody come near me or she'll be the first to get it!"

Peter Sherikov slid from the table and with one great stride swept his immense bulk in front of Reinhart. His huge black-furred fist rose in a smashing arc. Reinhart sailed against the wall, struck with ringing force and then slid slowly to the floor.

The Government troops threw their grapples quickly around him and jerked him to his feet. His body was frozen rigid. Blood dripped from his mouth. He spat bits of tooth, his eyes glazed over. Dixon stood dazed, mouth open, uncomprehending, as the grapples closed around his arms and legs.

Reinhart's gun skidded to the floor as he was yanked toward the door. One of the elderly Council members picked the gun up and examined it curiously. He laid it carefully on the table. "Fully loaded," he murmured. "Ready to fire."

Reinhart's battered face was dark with hate. "I should have killed all of you. All of you!" An ugly sneer twisted across his shredded lips. "If I could get my hands loose—"

"You won't," Margaret Duffe said. "You might as well not even bother to think about it." She signalled to the troops and they pulled Reinhart and Dixon roughly out of the room, two dazed figures, snarling and resentful.

For a moment the room was silent. Then the Council members shuffled nervously in their seats, beginning to breathe again.

Sherikov came over and put his big paw on Margaret Duffe's shoulder. "Are

you all right, Margaret?"

She smiled faintly. "I'm fine. Thanks...."

Sherikov touched her soft hair briefly. Then he broke away and began to pack up his briefcase busily. "I have to go. I'll get in touch with you later."

"Where are you going?" she asked hesitantly. "Can't you stay and—"

"I have to get back to the Urals." Sherikov grinned at her over his bushy black beard as he headed out of the room. "Some very important business to attend to."

Thomas Cole was sitting up in bed when Sherikov came to the door. Most of his awkward, hunched-over body was sealed in a thin envelope of transparent airproof plastic. Two robot attendants whirred ceaselessly at his side, their leads contacting his pulse, blood-pressure, respiration, body temperature.

Cole turned a little as the huge Pole tossed down his briefcase and seated himself on the window ledge.

"How are you feeling?" Sherikov asked him.

"Better."

"You see we've quite advanced therapy. Your burns should be healed in a few months."

"How is the war coming?"

"The war is over."

Cole's lips moved. "Icarus—"

"Icarus went as expected. As you expected." Sherikov leaned toward the bed. "Cole, I promised you something. I mean to keep my promise—as soon as you're well enough."

"To return me to my own time?"

"That's right. It's a relatively simple matter, now that Reinhart has been removed from power. You'll be back home again, back in your own time, your own world. We can supply you with some discs of platinum or something of the kind to finance your business. You'll need a new Fixit truck. Tools. And clothes. A few thousand dollars ought to do it."

Cole was silent.

"I've already contacted histo-research," Sherikov continued. "The time bubble is ready as soon as you are. We're somewhat beholden to you, as you probably realize. You've made it possible for us to actualize our greatest dream. The whole planet is seething with excitement. We're changing our economy over from war to—"

"They don't resent what happened? The dud must have made an awful lot of people feel downright bad."

"At first. But they got over it—as soon as they understood what was ahead. Too bad you won't be here to see it, Cole. A whole world breaking loose. Bursting out into the universe. They want me to have an ftl ship ready by the end of the week! Thousands of applications are already on file, men and women wanting to get in on the initial flight."

Cole smiled a little, "There won't be any band, there. No parade or welcoming committee waiting for them."

"Maybe not. Maybe the first ship will wind up on some dead world, nothing but sand and dried salt. But everybody wants to go. It's almost like a holiday. People running around and shouting and throwing things in the streets.

"Afraid I must get back to the labs.

Lots of reconstruction work being started." Sherikov dug into his bulging briefcase. "By the way.... One little thing. While you're recovering here, you might like to look at these." He tossed a handful of schematics on the bed.

Cole picked them up slowly. "What's this?"

"Just a little thing I designed." Sherikov arose and lumbered toward the door. "We're realigning our political structure to eliminate any recurrence of the Reinhart affair. This will block any more one-man power grabs." He jabbed a thick finger at the schematics. "It'll turn power over to all of us, not to just a limited number one person could dominate—the way Reinhart dominated the Council.

"This gimmick makes it possible for citizens to raise and decide issues directly. They won't have to wait for the Council to verbalize a measure. Any citizen can transmit his will with one of these, make his needs register on a central control that automatically responds. When a large enough segment of the population wants a certain thing done, these little gadgets set up an active field that touches all the others. An issue won't have to go through a formal Council. The citizens can express their will long before any bunch of gray-haired old men could get around to it."

Sherikov broke off, frowning.

"Of course," he continued slowly, "there's one little detail...."

"What's that?"

"I haven't been able to get a model to function. A few bugs.... Such intricate work never was in my line." He paused at the door. "Well, I hope I'll see you again before you go. Maybe if you feel well enough later on we could get together for one last talk. Maybe have dinner together sometime. Eh?"

But Thomas Cole wasn't listening. He was bent over the schematics, an intense frown on his weathered face. His long fingers moved restlessly over the schematics, tracing wiring and terminals. His lips moved as he calculated.

Sherikov waited a moment. Then he stepped out into the hall and softly closed the door after him.

He whistled merrily as he strode off down the corridor.